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“Like a dry-skin itching for growth on our bodies”: Katherine Mansfield and Una Marson’s Modernist Fantasies of Objecthood

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Katherine Mansfield’s Urewera Notebook and “The Woman at the Store” and Una Marson’s “Little Brown Girl” and “The Stranger,” share politically charged strategies for representing the psychological violence of imperialism. Although they write about diverse socio-political contexts, both Mansfield and Marson aestheticize the surfaces of bodies in stylistically commensurable ways in order to highlight how the forces of imperialism shape racial and gendered politics in the early twentieth century. The complex interrogations of race and gender found in Mansfield and Marson’s representations of Māori and Afro-Caribbean women and their dramatized treatments of these women as objects help transnational feminist scholars recover unrealized lines of modernist affiliation. These lines are formed by affectively shared but historically distinct experiences of colonial politics and forms of legitimation that have historically marked the surfaces of female bodies.

Keywords: Una Marson / Katherine Mansfield / race and ethnicity / transnational modernism / weak theory

Introduction

Katherine Mansfield and Una Marson might at first glance appear to have very little in common outside of the alliteration of their last names. Both women were born in British colonies and both spent portions of their lives in London, where they moved on the outskirts of modernist literary circles. Yet by the time that Marson first arrived in London in 1932 at the age of twenty-seven, almost ten years had passed since Mansfield’s death in Fontainebleau. And while Mansfield may have always been marked with the taint of the “little Colonial,” she did not face the racial discrimination that Marson experienced as a woman of color in the metropole. Whereas Mansfield’s early attempts at representing both Māori and European settler subjects alike petered out by the end of her life, Marson’s literary production shifted in the opposite direction. Her early mimicries and pastiches of canonical British writing, and her inclination to write devotional poems about love cast in the language of slavery, were gradually cast aside in favor of forms and subjects that were more overtly linked to her political activism.

In her early writing, Mansfield depicts indigenous Māori from the position of the privileged white settler in New Zealand. Her portrayals of Māori are almost solely based on her experiences with indigenous communities while camping through central North Island bush in 1907. Meanwhile Marson,

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the daughter of a Jamaican parson and the woman Delia Jarett-McCauley named “the first black British feminist to speak out against racism and sexism in Britain” (vii), grounded her Afro-Caribbean poetic voices in her own personal experiences. In contrast to Mansfield, Marson gives direct voice to black subjects in both London and the Caribbean throughout her oeuvre.

As Brent Hayes Edwards shows through his discussions of black internationalism, attending to how discourses “are translated, disseminated, reformulated, and debated in transnational contexts marked by *difference*” allows us to examine and lay bare obscured patterns and intellectual histories (7, my emphasis). I similarly explore how globally diverse interrogations of imperial discourses across socio-historical contexts marked by difference help to reveal important patterns of connection between transnational feminist modernist writers. I place a selection of Mansfield’s writings from *The Urewera Notebook* (1907) and her early story “The Woman at the Store” (1912) in collage with two of Marson’s poems from *The Moth and the Star* (1937)—“Little Brown Girl” and “The Stranger.”¹ The defamiliarizing *décalage* generated by my comparison demonstrates how intersectional feminist modernists share aesthetic strategies that critique the politics of race, ethnicity, and gender within the British Empire.

Linking these two writers is their incorporation of racist discourse into their first- and second-person narrative and poetic voices. Neither writer attempts to explain away the use of such discourse or recuperate the subjects who use it. As a result, they leave their readers with what Anne Anlin Cheng calls “the gift of discomfort” (“Psychoanalysis without Symptoms” 93). These are, as Cheng explains, moments when a work refuses “to redeem the continued existence of racism and other forms of violent discrimination,” giving us “not the fact of discrimination, but its unruly etiology and the education of desire that it has instilled in both the dominant and minority subject” (93). Rather than attempting to redeem the experience of having to face racist discourse daily, both Mansfield and Marson generate uneasy and uncomfortable moments by aestheticizing this discourse and localizing its effects upon the surfaces of bodies depicted. It is in this way and for these reasons, that Mansfield’s use of an ambiguously raced and gendered first-person narrator and Marson’s use of ironic poetic voices force us to reexamine

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objectified bodies that speak, and to ask what these others might tell us about that very condition of objecthood.

The embroilment of aesthetics with racist ideology is part of a long and damaging history. As has been well-documented, the movement of traditional Euro-American modernism is deeply intertwined with cultural appropriation and romantic primitivism, both of which have historically served Eurocentric narratives about innovation. Both Mansfield and Marson were caught up in these Eurocentric discourses and acts of appropriation, romantic idealization, and primitivism. In Mansfield's case, critics have regularly found it difficult to reconcile the presence of Māori characters in her early fiction with their absence after 1912. Furthermore, the charge of self-serving racial appropriation continues to be hotly contested in Mansfield studies. Anna Snaith, for example, argues that Mansfield's representations of Māori are part of her performative identity as a colonial outsider in London. Mansfield, Snaith writes, co-opts New Zealand indigeneity in order "to shock, to make herself different, as well as to respond to newness in avant-garde literary London," but "in doing so, she came up against the act of representation, the violence of making something over" (133-2).

In contrast to Mansfield, Marson was directly involved in and committed to the struggle for black civil rights in England. Yet as Allison Donnell writes in her introduction to Marson's *Selected Poems*, the "element of mimicry and pastiche in her works, along with her excessively devotional love poetry, and her use of orthodox poetic forms and archaic language continue to elicit embarrassed critical silences" (12). Two early poems titled "Jamaica," for example, are full of naïve idealizations. In both, Marson presents Jamaica as an Edenic idyll and does not comment on the harsh material realities of life for the disenfranchised. In contrast, the latter poems "In Jamaica" and "Heartbreak Cottages" refuse to shy away from images of material deprivation and economic disparity. The progression from her earlier to late poems demonstrates how Marson's commitments to the politics of race, ethnicity, gender, and their material effects upon bodies and spaces shift during her time in London. As Donnell notes, it is *only* after her arrival in London that Marson shows "an awareness of the ways in which political identities are shaped by race" (24).

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The ambiguous aesthetic treatments of race and ethnicity that we find in both writers' works cannot be simply explained as moments of racial appropriation or romanticized primitivism in Mansfield's case or as instances of colonial mimicry or unconscious internalization of racism in Marson's. To explain these writers' representations of race and ethnicity in such a way leads critics to want to redeem these already marginal writers by embarking on problematic recuperative readings of their disenfranchised (and occasionally disenfranchising) characters. As Cheng argues, literary scholars today are "justifiably wary of reifying definitions of culture and certainly of essentialized notions of identity" ("Psychoanalysis without Symptoms" 89). Yet, recuperative projects that seek to transform "objectified individuals into full, healthy subjects" by nature repeat and even at times reconsolidate "the very stereotypes that [they are] meant to dispel in the first place. The assignation of agency often comes at the price of neglecting the material circumstances as well as the afterlife of power, and it just as often presumes authorial intention and its effects." (89).

In response to this critical impasse, Cheng suggests that we must start considering whether there might be "a third position besides that of the victim or the parodic" (89). This is especially urgent when it comes to the raced subject who historically has been "both much too seen and not seen at all" (90). With this proposal in mind, I examine how Mansfield and Marson quite radically refuse to offer any sliver of recuperation for their objects or resolution for their readers. By depicting the ways that racial and gendered others persist as objects, both writers leave their readers dwelling in the violence of racism and misogyny with which we have become implicated.

Mansfield's Close Encounters of the Māori Kind

In the summer of 1907, Katherine Mansfield set out on a camping expedition through the central North Island of New Zealand, recording her thoughts and literary sketches inspired by this trip in *The Urewera Notebook*. Throughout the notebook, Mansfield's perspective shifts from a monolithic understanding of Māori lives and identities within settler colonial modernity toward one that is far more

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nuanced. By the end of her trip, Mansfield makes use of the surface-level perspective of romantic primitivism to critique the socio-political discrimination Māori faced.

Early in the diary, Mansfield expresses a moment of frustration that appears to be brought on by her romantic expectations of indigenous life. “I am so sick & tired of the third rate article,” she says (97). “Give me the Māori and the tourist—*but nothing between*—Also this place proved utterly disappointing after Umuroa, which was *fascinating in the extreme*—the Maoris here know—some English and some Māori—not like the other natives” (ibid, my emphasis).² Mansfield uses the term “native” not simply to differentiate between Māori and European settlers, but to distinguish between those Māori who match her romantic and primitivist notions of precolonial Māori existence and those who have assimilated into Western culture and are deemed to be “Brown Britons.”³ Mansfield’s views here are undoubtedly informed by primitivist ideologies. However as Cheng argues, “when it comes to phenomena like primitivism [...] the ideological suspects (imperialism, white racism, etc.) are far from surprising, and surely it is our job as thinkers to do more than repeatedly point out the fixity of colonial culpability” (“Wayward Life” 4). Similarly, Mansfield does in fact go on to interrogate and politicize her own colonial culpability in Māori disenfranchisement through her literary sketches.

In one entry, Mansfield describes the experience of camping for one night at the Ngati Whare settlement where their guide, Alfred Warbrick, lived with his wife, niece, and another woman named Wahi. Mrs. Warbrick, we are told, is “a picture in her pink dressing gown her wide elastic hat her black fringe” (98). Her niece, Johanna, is more subdued: she is a “fat wellmade [sic] child” of both Māori and European descent with “most strange eyes” (ibid.). That night, Mansfield notes how Wahi, “teaches me Māori” and “smokes a cigaret [sic]” while Johanna remains “rather silent” (ibid.). Johanna, we are told, is taught “fancy work,” reads “Byron & Shakespeare,” and “wants to go back to school” (ibid.). Upon visiting Johanna in her room, Mansfield makes note of her surrounds: “the clean place—the pictures—the beds—Byron & the candle—the flowers in a glass—sweet—the paper and pens—photos of Maoris & whites—too.” Johanna, she states, “stays by the door we see her jewellery [sic], her Mothers—I got a Maori kit” (ibid.). It is clear, through this description, that Johanna is quietly eager to show this

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sophisticated white female writer her copies of Byron and the jewelry inherited from her mother; Mansfield, however, has only a tepid interest in these objects of European culture. She cuts off her own description of the jewelry once owned by Johanna's mother and interrupts her own train of thought by remembering that she acquired a flax kit woven in the traditional Māori style. This entry makes it clear that Johanna disappoints Mansfield precisely because she is not one of those seemingly "natural" Māori from Umuroa who were "fascinating in the extreme" (97).

Yet while this entry seems at first to confirm the charges of primitivism aimed at Mansfield, this hypothesis is then undercut by a half-reported conversation that challenges Mansfield's views. Mansfield reports that someone asks her if she "thinks the old people at Umuroa [are] so dirty" and she responds, "yes" (98). But when asked, "Would I like to sleep there? Hot water—Home in the dark," Mansfield does not report her answer. Rather, her mind turns once more to the biracial Johanna, who she states is "more silent—there is something sad about it—all. (98)⁴ In this moment, Mansfield comes to register the fact that her notion of "fascinating" is her interlocuter's notion of "dirty." Her romantic idealizations merely signal a reality of dirt and poverty. Her assent to her interlocuter's claim that the "old people at Umuroa [are] so dirty" is in this context not a flippant disregard of "dirty" Māori that conflicts her earlier romanticizations, but a considered acknowledgement of the reality of Māori poverty and the danger of settler romantic primitivism.

Furthermore, this exchange helps Mansfield perceive Johanna's own hybrid life differently. Mansfield becomes aware that no matter how well Johanna performs her whiteness, she will always be considered a "Brown Briton" and will not be treated any differently from the so-called "savages" at Umuroa that Mansfield has naively been romanticizing. Additionally, Johanna's performance of life as a cultured Europeanized woman forces Mansfield to acknowledge the inauthenticity of her own female subjecthood. This recognition then inspires a moment of genuine empathy. As Mansfield summarizes upon departure, Johanna's life will continue in a seemingly endless routine as she "waters the flowers," will "go to milk the cow," and "then begin again—I suppose" (98).

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Johanna's escape from an Umuroa-like life of poverty, Mansfield acknowledges, comes at the cost of having to be remade under the pressure of European gender norms that Mansfield herself knows so well. Furthermore, Mansfield no longer perceives Johanna as only as a fascinating "native" or a disappointing colonial mimic. This leads her to identify with Johanna as an object of disenfranchisement. By producing a shared sense of objecthood, this diary entry calls into question Mansfield's own sense of herself as the benevolent daughter of an authentically English settler. Her encounter with this female Brown Briton forces Mansfield to experience a radical and self-shattering moment of *objecthood*: she too is a woman shaped by the colonial forces of the world around her. Through this experience, Mansfield comes to understand that Johanna's psychic reality is just as violent and discriminatory as any socio-economic consequence of colonialism.

From here, Mansfield pays far more attention to the psychological tension experienced by those caught between European and Māori worlds. In the vignette, "Sunset Tuesday," Mansfield describes a young Māori girl who appears to have held onto her Māori worldview, even as she adapts to the changes that settler society forces upon her. Surprisingly, she is represented as having adapted in a manner that is based in Māori epistemology and not, as critics tend to argue, in the ideologies of romantic primitivism:

A young Māori girl—climbs slowly up the hill—she does not see me—I do not move—
She reaches a little knoll—and suddenly sits down—native fashion—her legs crossed
under her hands clasped in her lap—She is dressed in a blue skirt & white soft blouse—
Round her neck is a piece of twisted flax & and [sic] a long piece of greenstone—is
suspended from it—Her black hair is twisted softly at the neck—she wears long white &
red bone earrings. She is very young [...]. She sits—silent—utterly motionless—her head
thrown back—All the lines of her face are passionate violent—crudely savage—but in
her lifted eyes slumbers a tragic illimitable Peace—. (107-108)

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Here is a girl who has adapted to Western culture by adopting some of the sartorial customs of this imposing settler society. At the same time, she also holds onto Māori practices and customs, as evidenced on the surface by her greenstone and earrings. More substantially, Mansfield captures the affect bound up with Māori notions of *mana whenua* (the power derived from the land to which one belongs and to which one's tribal history is tied) and *kaitiakitanga* (a sense of being obligated to act as guardian rather than possessor of that land) through her depiction of the way that the land itself and this young girl are intertwined.⁵ The girl does not impose herself upon the land but rather is consoled and given vitality through her connection to it. She animates and is animated by the land. In contrast, Mansfield stands frozen in the shrub, encountering the rigidity of a “cold, grey,” steel-like lake that resists her and a land that refuses to awake to her foreign presence (107). This young girl holds onto her Māori spirituality, giving her a stillness and pride that Johanna's restless Europeanized existence lacks, despite the terror derived from the ravaging of land and Māori culture.

In this vignette, Mansfield captures an alternative ontological existence than the one she encountered in Johanna. With Johanna, Mansfield experiences what Cheng calls a moment of “contamination”: a moment “when reification and recognition fuse, when conditions of subjecthood and objecthood merge, when the fetishist savors his or her own vertiginous intimacy with the dreamed object and vice versa” (*Second Skin* 15). But in “Sunset Tuesday” there is no “vertiginous intimacy” between Mansfield and the girl. Mansfield is “alone—[...] hidden—Life seems to have passed away” (107). The girl in turn does not see her, let alone acknowledge her presence. The two women are utterly separate. The birds call and answer to each other with an “exstasy [sic] of song, the “land sleeps,” the water whispers, the trees brood silently, and the girl throws her head back with passion, but Mansfield is erased as a subject that feels, recognizes, or desires (107-108). While the pleasure of her encounter with Johanna is born out of a self-mastery that forces her to acknowledge her own colonial culpability, here the pleasure belongs solely to the unknowable other. The vignette thus becomes a kind of elegy for a Māori subjecthood that Mansfield hopes will survive the process of colonization, but ultimately suspects will fall victim to the psychological violence of settler colonialism. Such subjecthood, Mansfield's vignette seems

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to suggest, will ultimately fall victim to the white settler's desire to remedy the unease they feel, as the foreign invader in this land, by remaking Māori into Brown Britons.

If "Sunset Tuesday" elegizes Māori subjecthood, then "The Woman at the Store" satirically attacks the project of "whitening" Māori individuals until they become pliable Brown Britons. This story, published in Johnathan Middleton Murry's *Rhythm*, offers a critique of the Brown Briton figure and the cultural politics of colonialism that have formed her. The plot revolves around the experiences of three people, Jo, Jim, and an unnamed narrator, whose genders and ethnicities are left undefined.⁶ After travelling through the New Zealand bush on horseback, they arrive at an isolated store to stock up and rest. There they encounter a European woman who has been physically and psychologically destroyed after years of an unhappy marriage and isolated life. At the end of the story, the narrator and Jim discover that the woman has murdered her abusive husband and buried his body in the garden.

When the travelers arrive at the unnamed woman's store, Jim explains that her loneliness is due to the fact that "the only people who come through now are Maoris and sundowners!" (27). Until now, critics have not considered the possibility that these travelers might be Māori. It has been taken for granted that the travelers are "sundowners," meaning they are white settlers looking for a place to camp for the night. But when the woman first comes out of the store at her mad daughter's insistence, she exhibits surprise at encountering this group. She tells them, with her rifle in hand, that she had thought they were hawks because her daughter, Else, ran into the house saying "'Mumma [...] there's three brown things comin' over the 'ill' [...]" (24).

Generally, critics have drawn conclusions based on this miscommunication about the supposed hawks in symbolic terms. Snaith, for example, argues that this misinterpretation emphasizes how "boundaries between human and animal" are unstable in this story, just as the boundaries between "dream and nightmare, fantasy and reality" are porous in this "brutal and unforgiving landscape" (130). But what would it mean to presume that these three travelers literally have the brown skin of a mixed-race person like Johanna? Accepting the suggestion that one of Mansfield's characters—even a mentally unstable one—might describe Māori as "brown things" is certainly an uncomfortable critical exercise. However,

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paying attention to this surface-level textual evidence reveals that Mansfield depicts “brown” bodily surfaces in such a way as to make apparent the psychological violence of settler colonialism upon Māori.

It is important to note that despite her aberrant personality, Else is the most insightful and literal-minded figure of the group. The narrator herself recognizes the child’s intelligence when she says that Else’s drawings are the “creations of a lunatic with a lunatic’s cleverness” (30).⁷ Mansfield also offers a clue pointing to the travelers’ ethnicity at the opening of the story:

All that day the heat was terrible. The wind blew close to the ground; it rooted among the tussock grass, slithered along the road, so that *the white pumice dust* swirled in our faces, settled and sifted over us and *was like a dry-skin itching for growth on our bodies*. The horses stumbled along, coughing and chuffing [...]. Jim rode beside me, white as a clown, his black eyes glittered, and he kept shooting out his tongue and moistening his lips. (22, my emphasis)

With his face covered in the incessant white dust, his dark eyes glittering, and his tongue “shooting out” like a stereotypical “primitive,” Jim is reminiscent of an inverted minstrelsy performer. He is an ironic portrait of a dark-skinned man who wears white-face and slyly caricatures the Brown Briton. In this opening passage that cinematically describes the travelers as they move through the vast bush, Mansfield audaciously utilizes the surfaces of her characters’ bodies to clue the reader into her narrative strategy: surfaces should be treated as sites where the psychosomatic consequences of settler colonialism are localized. These sites are what clue canny readers into the psychological violence of settler-colonial New Zealand that lies lurking beneath the surface of quotidian life.⁸

Later in the story when the narrator is invited into the woman’s house to collect an ointment for her horse’s sores, surfaces again become a key element of interpretive meaning. The narrator observes the

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small room and takes keen notice of the walls plastered with dated periodicals. Her attention is then drawn toward the color print of Richard Seddon, the stalwart of colonial era politics who initially opposed women's suffrage and who had at best, a sympathetic but paternalistic attitude towards Māori. Mansfield's careful allusion to Seddon in this moment highlights the similarities between the subjugation of women and Māori in the colony.

Yet in her emotionless encounter with the woman and her home, it becomes clear that the narrator fails to recognize her own subjugation. She even goes so far as to sneer at the woman's banal existence: "good Lord, what a life!" She thinks to herself. "Imagine being here day in and day out, with that rat of a child and a mangy dog. Imagine bothering about ironing. *Mad*, of course she's mad!" (25-26, emphasis in original). But instead of having her narrator directly recognize her own disenfranchisement in a moment of empathy, Mansfield creatively outsources this fact to the surfaces of her narrative space: the narrator's failure to recognize her own subjugation mocks her from the walls of the store where the history of Māori and female disenfranchisement has been pasted.

The only thought the narrator has in response to the woman's life is the seemingly unrelated observation that there is "no twilight in our New Zealand days, but a curious half-hour when everything appears grotesque—it frightens—as though the savage spirit of the country walked abroad and sneered at what it saw" (25). On the one hand, this quote reveals Mansfield's own disdain for European settlers who unquestionably and presumptuously believed that they could master the wild landscape of New Zealand and establish a new Britannia in the outreaches of the Empire. On the other hand, it also reveals that the "savage" spirit, the Māori spirit of the land, also sneers equally at the oblivious "Brown Briton" narrator. This spirit sneers at the Māori woman whose whiteness is, in Mansfield's own words, "like a dry skin itching for growth" on her body (22). Having intuited this supernatural judgment without consciously realizing it, the narrator can only state that "sitting alone in the hideous room I grew afraid" (25).

The story climaxes when after a sleepless night in the storeroom for Jim and the narrator and a passionate night in the woman's bedroom for Jo, Else reveals through a drawing that the woman killed her husband and buried him in the garden. The story then comes to a close as the narrator and Jim leave

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the woman, her store, and the love-struck Jo behind. However, the implication that they will leave this uncivilized stopping place for an enlightened European settlement after days in the bush is not depicted positively. After “a bend in the road,” the “whole place disappeared,” but the sense of unease caused by this desolate and degenerate place seems to follow Jim and the narrator (32). While Jo might be caught up in the woman’s murderous web, the narrator seems no better off: she cannot simply “escape” the insidious violence of life for Māori in colonial New Zealand in the same way that she escapes this mad woman and her store. Mansfield thus leaves the reader with the uncomfortable realization that Brown Britons, like this narrator and Johanna, will endlessly continue to be plagued with the itch of white skin.

Marson Burning an Illusion

In “Psychoanalysis without Symptoms,” Cheng argues that the “ethical crisis of intersubjective relations” stems from the realization that “our ontological survival depends on the cannibalism of the other” (97, 98). This psychic cannibalization “forms the basis of our profound narcissism, which in turn enables the consolidation of our identities and subjectivity” (98). In “The Woman at the Store,” Mansfield forces readers to face this ethical crisis and it leaves us dizzy with the gift of discomfort. For a modernist writer whose racial appropriation tends to be interpreted merely as “theft in the service of self-augmentation,” identifying Mansfield’s acknowledgement of this ethical crisis is a key reassessment of her literary representations of Māori lives (Cheng, *Ornamentalism* 148).

Nevertheless, Mansfield’s empathetic embodiments of Māori are a bid on the part of the privileged white subject to endow the racial other with psychological interiority. While these representations of the Brown Briton *might* be sites of recognition for Māori individuals, Mansfield is ultimately concerned with depicting a psychological life that confronts that white subject’s own personhood and makes conscious their own colonial culpability. As Cheng demonstrates through her sustained cultural critique of Asiatic femininity in *Ornamentalism*, not all bodies can or should “instantiate the attempts to equip them with psychic or corporeal interiority”: rather the act of repelling these attempts can offer a path out of the ethical crisis of intersubjective relations, particularly for the

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subject living as an object of imperial desire (19). The bodies that we encounter as readers in Marson's "The Stranger" and "Little Brown Girl" are two such examples of subjects who reject the instantiation of psychic and corporeal interiority. Instead, these subjects lead us to encounter and confront the external and material excesses of a life of ornamental personhood.

Ornamentality, according to Cheng, is a condition of being. It is a "peculiar state of being produced out of the fusion between 'thingliness' and 'personness.'" Often, it "describes a condition of subjective coercion, reduction, and discipline, but it can also provoke considerations of alternative modes of being and of action for subjects who have not been considered subjects, or subjects who have come to know themselves through objects" (18). Most importantly, ornamental personhood can challenge the politics of Western modern personhood:

This synthetic being, relegated to the margins of modernity and discounted as a nonperson, holds the key to understanding the inorganic animating the heart of the modern organic subject. She/it brings into view an alternative form of life, not at the site of the free modern subject and his celebrated autonomy, but on the contrary, at the encrusted edges and crevices of defiled, feminine, ornamented bodies. (*Ornamentalism* 23)

Through the use of the second-person poetic voice which situates racial personhood within "attachments that are metonymic and hence superficial, detachable and migratory," these poems engage with the ontological experience of subjects who have been made into objects and thus made strange to themselves. More than eighty years before Cheng's theorization of ornamentalism, Marson acknowledges in poetic form that there is "something more fraught [...] at stake than authenticity" (43). "The Stranger" and "Little Brown Girl" thus attend to the possibility that "the ideal of a naked or unornamented self" which governs notions of the free modern subject "cannot be the solution to the problem of racism, oppression,

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or discrimination, for that ideal denies how the (racialized) ‘self’ is always already an effect of the ornament worn” (43).

“The Stranger” is written from the perspective of an Afro-Caribbean woman who has been told by a white English man that he likes “talking to people like me” (98). And as the woman says, by “people like me” this man specifically means “foreign girls who are brown of skin / And have black kinky hair / And have strange black eyes” (98). The poem is frank in its acknowledgement of the man’s coercive and reductive treatment of this woman’s body: flesh becomes essence, and “brown of skin” becomes a metonym for personhood. What is puzzling is that instead of resisting this objectification in pursuit of subjective agency (in the same manner that the speaker of “Nigger,” for example, fights against blatant racism by pleading for God to “save” the souls of those who do not “live / and think and feel in unison / With all humanity” [87]), this woman’s “defiance of objectification” contrarily gives rise to further “objectness” (Cheng, *Ornamentalism* 17).

Following the first stanza, which describes her encounter with the man with “a wistful smile / That enchanted me” and caused her to “pause” before returning “the compliment / So sweetly made,” the speaker’s defiance against the man’s objectification of her takes the form of an imagined retort (98). “So you like talking to people like me,” the second stanza begins, before then going on in the third to offer an example of the “tales I tell / Of a tropic Paradise” from which he assumes she comes (ibid.). Marson makes use of the three-part descriptive meditative structure to convey this dramatic monologue: the poem opens with a description of the scene of encounter and then turns at the “So,” which begins the second stanza, shifting toward an interior meditation on the fantasy paradise that the encounter with the man evokes in her. Finally, the poem turns once more in the final stanza, revisiting the opening scene with the subject and object now reversed: it is not the man “with a wistful smile” who “who liked talking to me,” but an “I” who likes “listening to you, / Friend with the wistful smile” (ibid.). Corey Marks characterizes the descriptive-meditative poem as one that “dramatize[s] a moment of realization, of changing thought” (123). However in Marson’s poem, there is no pattern of changing thought for the speaker. The poem

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does not describe a moment of epiphany for the speaker because Marson refuses to offer any such moment of ostensibly authentic psychic interiority on her behalf.

Throughout history, the black body has been and continues to be exploited “as a prosthesis of white desire” (Cheng, *Ornamentalism* 137). As the site of bare (mere) flesh, the female black body in particular has been made into the site of material degradation, denigration, enslavement in the service of white racist exploitation, both materially and within the psychological dyad of subject/object.⁹ After consistently being made into both the material and psychic object of white self-mastery in the British Empire, the Afro-Caribbean woman of Marson’s poem rejects the possibility of securing any kind of self-recuperating and subversive agency. In this descriptive-meditative poem, the return to the catalyzing scene after the exaggerated aesthetics of the island fantasy is a moment of realization for the reader alone: the reader recognizes that the speaker does not only come to enact an empowered manipulation of this man after being coercively pulled into his fantasy. Rather, she always already has been casting the spell of her “subject-as-object enchantment” over him (Cheng, *Ornamentalism* 18). In his encounter with this woman, the coercive Englishman indulges in a “fantasy of turning things into persons through the conduit of racial meaning in order, paradoxically, to allow [him] to escape [his] own humanness” (Cheng, *Ornamentalism* 98). But the woman, as a subject who lives the life of the object, can refuse to play her designated role in the man’s escape by “mirroring the inhumanness of the human” (ibid.).

The description of an entirely imagined island paradise that we are offered in the third stanza is the poem’s “subject-as-object enchantment” (Cheng, *Ornamentalism* 18). The paradise that Marson transcribes is the materialization of the kind of fantasy site that this man wishes to possess: it has “sunkissed woods and mountains high,” “skies that are bluer than ever,” “magic sunsets and marvelous seas,” “waterfalls” that clatter down, “stars so near,” a “moon so large,” and “fireflies, stars of the earth” (Marson 98). The man turns the woman into the island paradise through the conduit of racial meaning in order to escape the “humanness” of his own western personhood: by having her embody his imagined paradise, this man can evade any acknowledgement of the brutality of imperialism with which he is inextricably bound. Black skin, brown hair, and dark eyes are the conduits of his attempt to project his

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own primitivist faith in the good of the imperialist civilizing mission upon the body of this woman: as the speaker makes clear, her so-called embodiment of this fantasy merely leads the way to the man's energetic impulse to tell "tales" of his own "great country" and "marvelous land" (ibid.) The bodies of this woman and women "like her" ultimately become, as Sharon Patricia Holland theorizes in relation to the "Black. Colored. Female. Queer" woman, a "dead zone" caught in the impasse between recognition and reification, an impasse "where ideas of nation, place, and origin are wholly invested in seeing and believing in the archaic native" (78).

Nevertheless, the poem ends with an emphasis on the singular pleasure that this woman feels in manipulating the man's desire to confine her to a historically determined stereotype, suggesting that the aesthetic materializations of poetry have the power to reanimate the "dead zone" of the black woman's body. By the time readers reach this final admission of pleasure, it becomes clear that she has in fact never been "enchanted" by his smile. From its very first line, the poem's impetus has been an attempt, on the part of the subject who defyingly lives as an object, to undermine this man and his fantasy life and provoke "alternative modes of being and of action for subjects ['like' her] who have not been considered subjects" (Cheng, *Ornamentalism* 18).

So while upon first glance, this woman appears to be the victim of this man's racist stereotyping, coerced into the disempowered position of the other and forced to unwittingly embody the "fantasy of living on as a thing," the poem in fact empowers her to defy a life of objectification precisely by exaggerating her "objectness" (Cheng, *Ornamentalism* 150). Ultimately, the woman is not under attack. Her attachments are "superficial, detachable, and migratory," allowing her to quarantine herself from the man's desire (Cheng, *Ornamentalism* 19). Furthermore, her migratory subject position allows her to evade both the man's and the reader's impulse for a kind of recognition that is always already bound up in the reification of the racialized other. Ultimately the man who is caught up in this woman's subject-as-object enchantment becomes the object that is psychically cannibalized. As the speaker watches on with an almost vampiric desire, the reader is left with a satisfying and yet unnerving image of a man whose sense of himself is consolidated by a delusion orchestrated by this supposedly powerless racial other.

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For Cheng, these alternate modes of persisting, like that which we find in “The Stranger,” constitute a kind of politics. The “fantasy of living on as a thing, undetected by humans” can “serve as a fable for the social subject who is an object” (*Ornamentalism* 150). Such a fantasy can offer a lesson not of assimilation, but of existing, “somehow, alongside,” those endowed with the privilege of personhood, which is “the white, masculine, organic personhood of Western modernity” (*Ornamentalism* 150, 23). In “Little Brown Girl,” we encounter an adult speaker who lives on, in the metropole, as a “thing” undetected by the Londoners around her. The poem interrogates the “superfluous details” of life in London, for an Afro-Caribbean woman, that “provide the conditions under which personhood is negotiated” (*Ornamentalism* 22). In doing so, it depicts not only the drama of having been made into an object, but also the afterlife of such an object. It depicts how the body that “has been defiled and radically severed from its own sense of humanity” might regain that humanity through the mediation of aesthetics and the re-approach toward “the self as a stranger” (154, 155).

The adult speaker of “Little Brown Girl” re-approaches herself as a stranger by aestheticizing the experience of having “wander[ed] alone” through “the streets / Of the great city / Of London” as a child (Marson 92). Throughout the poem, the speaker interrogates the girl who lives on in her memory as an object: in the first four stanzas alone, the speaker asks, “Why do you wander alone,” “why do you start and wince / When white folk stare at you”; “Why did you leave / Your little sunlit land”; “What are you seeking, / What would you have?” (ibid.). But the girl offers no answers in return. As her designation suggests, this “little brown girl” is purely an object whose interiority is inaccessible to the speaker. While the speaker sees the child “toss [her] head / As though [she is] proud / To be brown,” the fact of having been radically severed from this moment of innocence means that as an adult she cannot access this childhood feeling (94). The speaker knows that “To be so often alone / In a crowd of whites,” makes it impossible to forget that “you are brown,” because “people staring at you / Remind you of your colour” (95). By asking the girl if she knows that it is impossible to escape these feelings, the speaker reveals her attempt to pinpoint the instigating moment when she began to be remade as an object. Yet she also reveals how she continues to reject the lesson of assimilation (described in the poem through her

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ventriloquizing of white London voices) and lives on undetected “as a thing” in defiance of the hegemony of Western personhood.

While the girl is presented as pure object (she is addressed as “you” throughout the poem), the speaker assumes multiple pronouns across the stanzas, signaling her own “superficial, detachable, and migratory” attachments that have allowed her to fugitively live on despite the demands of the white, masculine, Western center (Cheng, *Ornamentalism* 19). For example, she asks the girl if she thinks white Londoners’ question why a “little brown girl / Should roam about *their* city / *Their* white, white city,” separating herself from those white masses (Marson 92, my emphasis). But then in the next stanza she assumes the subject position of the white Londoner, asking why the girl left her “little sunlit land / Where *we* sometimes go / To rest and get brown” (ibid., my emphasis). While she is careful not to align herself directly with the subject position of the “brown girl,” she does vaguely gesture toward solidarity by making use of the gender-neutral indefinite pronoun: “People frown if *one* really laughs” in London, she says for example (ibid., my emphasis). She also aligns herself against the London masses when describing them: “And the folks are all white,” she says, and “*they* all seem the same / As *they* say that Negroes seem”, suggesting that when she is referring to “Negroes,” what she is really saying is “we” (93, my emphasis).

Despite this migratory nature of her subject position, the speaker covertly describes the conditions under which her personhood has been negotiated in four key stanzas. In the fourth, sixth and seventh stanzas, the speaker assaults the girl (and the reader) with the superfluous details of the quotidian through the accumulation of descriptive noun phrases: there are “no laughing faces,” “everyone is quiet,” “There’s nothing picturesque”; there are only “the shops,” “the lovely things” in “the show windows,” the “little hats,” “the Bobbies,” “the book stalls,” “the City lights,” “the pictures,” “the theatres,” and a series of white strangers who ask “Do you like” these metropolitan objects?, “Why do you look so hard” at them?, and “from whence are you?” (92-94).

The coercive, reductive, and disciplinary nature of this existence is then most explicitly evoked through the structural echoes that occur across two lines. According to the speaker, there is nothing to be

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“seen in the streets” but people “clad / In *Coats, Coats, Coats, / Coats* in autumn, winter and spring” (92). Similarly, we are told a few lines later that “all the folks are *white – / White, white, white*” (93, my emphasis). Through the rhythmic and grammatical repetition of these lines, the speaker draws an affiliation between whiteness as a construct and the sartorial customs of the English. So when the speaker goes on to ventriloquize those Londoners’ coercive demands for assimilation, asking “Wouldn’t you like a coat / With a fifty pound tag on it,” the pressure to be remade as “white” is palpable (ibid.).

Then in the final stanza of this poem, the speaker once more draws an association between concepts as she echoes her earlier statements. She states that the girl “stroll[s] about London / *Seeking, seeking, seeking,*” and asks, “What are you *seeking* / To discover in this dismal / City of *ours*?” (95, my emphasis). The act of refusing to put on the coat of “white” leaves the girl “seeking” to discover something that the speaker “know[s]” is “something / That does not really exist” (ibid.). The speaker knows that the possibility of intersubjective recognition, without the violence of colonial discipline, is the object of desire that this girl seeks but cannot acquire. The speaker *knows* that the girl’s sought-after object cannot be found precisely because she herself has not discovered it. Instead, she has found something more radical: she has carved out a space for the social subject like her to exist alongside (and thus outside of) the coercive, reductive, and disciplinary pressures of the metropole. She knows that the girl can live defying as an object, and that she will find this life in the alternate version of the “city” that is definitively and defyingly “*ours*” (ibid., my emphasis). Ultimately, the speaker can re-approach the part of herself that has been long sealed off through her engagement with its haunting residue, depicted here as the “little brown girl” of her past. In doing so, her body once more becomes the instrument of her own self-making and the embodiment of her own desire.

Conclusion

In her unpublished *Autobiography of a Brown Girl*, Marson describes her friendship with with an Englishman who could have been the model for the wistful man of “The Stranger.” She describes being interested in a “smart young man” who “was probably interested in me because to him I was strange and

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exotic” (qtd. in Jarrett-Macauley, ““When Does it Stop?””). Their friendship, she writes, “was an experience I would not have missed and I learned a great deal that was an eye opener to me about the young men of this ‘brave new world’” (ibid.). What Marson learned, it seems, was that these Englishman were “very anxious that I should see them, but equally anxious that people should not see them with me” (ibid.). Race, as the work of Frantz Fanon shows us, is an “epidermal schema” (112). It is, in Cheng’s words, “something ineluctably tied to the modality of the visible” and so racial difference “teaches us *to see*” (*Second Skin* 7). And yet, as Cheng asks, when it comes to depictions of race, ethnicity, and gender in modernist works of art, “are we in fact seeing what we think we are seeing?” (*Second Skin* 7).

Like Cheng, I have not been interested in this essay in what visibility (or voice, for that matter) hides; rather, I have asked questions about what and “how it is that we have failed to see” things on the surface of bodies, spaces, stories, and poems in Mansfield’s and Marson’s writing (*Second Skin* 8). As Cheng writes, “the early Modernists were in many ways more frank than we are about the seductions and efficacies of otherness in the acts of self-making” (*Second Skin* 14). In addition to “acts of greed, misrecognition, and borrowing,” European modernists like Mansfield “immersed themselves in skins that were not their own and constructed themselves as imagined subjects through that inhabitation” (Cheng, *Second Skin* 166). What is surprising is that the modernist “desire to remake oneself as object” can in fact be “shared by those we think would be most allergic to such transformation” (ibid.). Marson, as a Jamaican woman burdened by the epidermal schema of Western imperialist racism, is certainly one of these surprising additions to the ranks of those who desire to remake themselves as objects. These poems show that individuation for Afro-Caribbean subjects in London ultimately “does not always take the forms of exercising power and agency in the traditional sense, but may instead be achieved through self-evacuation as well as self-syntheticization” (Cheng, *Second Skin* 166).

In the *Urewera Notebook*, “The Woman at the Store,” “The Stranger,” and “Little Brown Girl,” both Mansfield and Marson reject the impulse to recuperate disenfranchised subjects by restoring agency on their behalf. Instead, both writers create a fantasy of objecthood that works to disrupt the assured subjectivities of those who hold all the power within the psychological dyad of subject and object, self

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and other—whether that object is an actual or fictional person, or a literary text itself. In creating such fantasies that place readers in an experiential position of objecthood, Mansfield and Marson leave readers with a recognition of what it might *feel* like to be objectified in this way and thus, what it would mean to experience the material reality of these objectifications that occur at the intersection of race, ethnicity, and gender.

In this way, Mansfield and Marson's projects are akin to what Wai Chi Dimock and Paul Saint-Amour describe as weak theory.¹⁰ In the past several decades, transnational modernist scholars have been calling renewed attention to previously obscured modernist "mediators" who "reopen closed cases and undo any naturalized hierarchies" (Dimock 736). According to Saint-Amour, these mediators of weak social ties—that is, these agents who are treated not as "passive links among a finite set of givens" but as actors who "introduce new elements, new directions" and alter "the dynamics among several newly connected and jointly differentiated neighborhoods" within larger networks of exchange (Dimock 736)—"have for a while now" been given "pride of place" as we have traced "the social networks in which modernist cultural producers were embedded" (Saint-Amour 447).

Somewhat contradictorily, however, Saint-Amour demonstrates the "*centrifugal* nature of the spin-offs" advocated by Dimock's weak theory (Dimock 737, my emphasis) through reference to the now well-known photograph of Una Marson centered in a coterie of transnational modernists who were affiliated with the BBC Eastern service. These modernists were drawn together, he writes, by the "*centripetal* object" of the microphone (Saint-Amour 450, my emphasis). This conflict between centripetal and centrifugal forces brought to the fore in Saint-Amour's portrait of weak social ties is ultimately the issue that motivates my own weak theorizing in this article. Despite the radical rethinking of transnational connections in Saint-Amour's article, even his framework does not accommodate the modernist missed-connections that I have explored here. For the photo of Marson at the BBC ultimately can only metonymize "networks of writers, editors, and translators" who are nevertheless still "joined" by "post, telegraph, and radio" (450-1), or "who never met in person" but "were connected through print—through the writing of appreciative reviews, introductions, critiques, parodies, even diatribes" (449).

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Centripetal forces and direct social connections, rather than centrifugal spin-outs and wayward paths, continue to govern how we approach and understand the circulation of objects through modernist cultural networks.

The work described by Saint-Amour of seeking to “know but not necessarily know better than [the objects we study]” will hopefully continue to “irritate” modernist studies scholars into “a state of self-scrutiny” (444, 442). Nevertheless, we must crucially acknowledge that the kind of “crisis of self-recognition” (442) that Saint-Amour foresees for the field has already been modeled for us in radical ways in the weak and wayward encounters that occur (or did not occur) between transnational modernist writers. By placing two transnational modernists who have no direct connection in collage with one another, I have demonstrated that the kind of anti-suspicious “new modesty of literary criticism” described by Jeffrey Williams, or even Cheng’s “hermeneutics of susceptibility” (“Wayward Life” 4), is ultimately anything but new.

Notes

¹ As Susan Stanford Friedman argues, collage as a method of reading analytically involves “the scholar’s act of paratactic cutting and pasting. It establishes a montage of differences where the putting side by side illuminates those differences at the same time that it spotlights commonalities” (*Planetary Modernisms* 77). And as R. Radhakrishnan argues, placing components in reciprocal defamiliarization with each other in this way takes “meaning out of its system” and “exposes it merely as one among myriad contingent [...] possibilities” (86). Such comparison allows components to act self-problematically “alongside and simultaneously” with each other, thereby problematizing “themselves both in relationship to each other and in acknowledgement of the transcendent authority” of the “natural” systems out from which they are drawn (87). By comparing Mansfield and Marson’s works, I draw each writer out of the systems that have hitherto provided the dominant criteria for analyses of their writing and politics.

² All references to the *Urewera Notebook* are from Plumridge’s edition.

³ In the New Zealand context, the “brown Briton” was the Māori individual who was forced to take on the epistemologies and ideologies of the white European settler. According to James Belich in *Paradise Reforged*, settlers “whitened” Māori by describing them as “brown” in order to legitimate the country’s “British” identity (189). Jacob Pollock argues that this process of making “Brown Britons” by “whitening” them was a method of turning Māori into a “better class of savage” (36). By defining Māori as “brown” rather than “black,” white New Zealanders “could say that Maori were able to adapt to Pākehā civilization” (37). Furthermore, it “made the meaning of ‘Maori’ adaptable. The term could be seen as a method for reducing difference, for negotiating Maori otherness, for securing Maori within a firmly British framework, for reducing the threat posed by the ‘savage’, for forgetting” (ibid.).

⁴ It is unclear who Mansfield's interlocuter is in this moment, however the unintelligible section of writing that Plumridge has transcribed as "WW?" suggests that Mansfield is speaking with either Wahi or Mrs. Warbrick.

⁵ For an in-depth discussion of *mana whenua* and *kaitiakitanga*, see Huia Tomlins Jahnke and Malcolm Mulholland's *Mana Tangata: Politics of Empowerment*.

⁶ The ambiguity of these characters' genders and ethnicities is due in part to a discrepancy between the original version of the story published in *Rhythm* in 1912, and the story containing posthumous textual revisions by Murry, published in 1924 in *Something Childish and Other Stories*. In the 1912 version, Jim's name is Hin (the Māori word for daughter, *hine*, sans the letter 'e') and Else is named Els (short for Elizabeth). The narrator and the woman are, like the 1924 version, unnamed, and Jo's name remains the same. In each version, multiple gendered pronouns are used making it clear that Jo and Jim/Hin are male. But in the 1912 version, the narrator's gender is entirely ambiguous. Despite the fact that she is a participant in the story she tells, no pronouns are ever used in relation to her. With Murry's corrections, however, she is gendered female in a key passage. In 1912, the quote reads:

"I'll draw all of you when you're gone [...], and that one"—she [Els] pointed to me—"with no clothes on in the creek." I looked at *her* [i.e. Els] where *she wouldn't* see me *frown*. (16)

In this quote, the narrator's gender is left undefined. But Murry's edits in 1924 change the sentence significantly by simply shifting the quotation marks (thereby attributing both sentences to Else, instead of the first to Else and the second to the narrator), and changing the adverbial clause of the last sentence:

"I'll draw all of you when you're gone [...], and that one"—she [Else] pointed to me—"with no clothes on in the creek. I looked at her where *she* [i.e. the narrator] *couldn't* see me *from*." (*Something Childish* 68)

There is no extant manuscript of this story so it is impossible to confirm Mansfield's intentions. Nevertheless, even with Murry's "correction," the narrator's gender remains ambiguous for the first two thirds of the story. Given the parallels made between the woman and the narrator (for example, the narrator is the only one invited into this woman's domestic sphere at first, and given the woman's history with threatening men, this seems significant), I argue that Mansfield intended the narrator to be a woman, but did not necessarily intend for this to be unambiguous (which becomes the case when Murry edits the story). Contrarily, by changing Hin's name to Jim, I argue that Murry *erases* a textual clue that was *meant* to at least lead readers to question their assumption that these travelers are all white. Jim/Hin's ethnicity, I argue, was not meant to be quite so obfuscated because this opens the reader up to the possibility that these characters may be Māori.

⁷ Else's description of the three travelers being "three brown things" is commensurable with Mansfield's own descriptions of indigenous peoples. For example, early in the *Urewera Notebook*, she notes that she ate lunch with a Māori man who she simply calls a "great brown fellow" (90).

⁸ For an excellent analysis of this lurking psychological violence in Mansfield's work, see Saikat Majumdar's chapter on Mansfield in *Prose of the World: Modernism and the Banality of Empire*.

⁹ Most famously, Franz Fanon argues in *Black Skin, White Masks*, that the phenomenology of blackness can only be understood in the encounter with the white imagination. To be black, is to be an object assembled in the mind of the white other; it is to be an object constructed by socio-economic realities and reproduced myths and assumptions. As George Yancy writes, this is an "ethically corrupt relational ontology [...]" that is predicated on the [binary] structure of whiteness" (xiv). Moreover, "whiteness requires the so-called degraded and dangerous Black body. It is this structural requirement that reveals both the socially constructed nature of whiteness and its deep fragility" (ibid).

When it comes to conceptualizing racial embodiment, two theorizations predominate: Fanon's notion of the "epidermal racial schema" (*Black Skin, White Masks* 112), which "denaturalizes black skin as the product of a shattering white gaze" (Cheng, *Ornamentalism* 4); and Hortense Spillers's "hieroglyphics of the flesh," a formulation that has been used to demarcate the less-than-human from the human, and describes how suffering, wounded, bare flesh—what Spillers describes as "the zero degree of social conceptualization that does not escape

concealment under the brush of discourse, or the reflexes of iconography”—tells the story of how black subjectivity has been made inferior to the white “body” (67).

¹⁰ In “Weak Theory: Henry James, Colm Tóibín, and W. B. Yeats,” Wai Chi Dimock points out that Bruno Latour’s work in *We Have Never Been Modern* “urges us to think [...] about tangential processes, wayward lines of association, oblique to an existing system, pulling away from it and stretching it in unexpected ways” (736). Taking his lead from Dimock, along with other practitioners of “weak theory,” Saint-Amour points to transnational modernist projects that trace “weak social ties” as examples of how modernist studies scholars have already been paying close attention to how the “centrifugal forces” that Dimock describes function within modernist networks (442-454).

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