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The Paradox Of The Striptease

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THE PARADOX OF THE STRIPTease Benjamin Kahan

Second Skin: Josephine Baker and the Modern Surface by Anne Anlin Cheng. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011. Pp. 256. \$49.95 cloth, \$24.95 paper.

Roland Barthes opens his essay “Striptease” in *Mythologies* with the following observation: “Striptease—at least Parisian striptease—is based on a contradiction: Woman is desexualized at the very moment when she is stripped naked.”¹ In his elaboration of this initial claim, Barthes sets out in two directions. He continues to develop the paradox of the striptease, describing the costumes as

establishing the woman *right from the start* as an object in disguise. The end of the striptease is then no longer to drag into the light a hidden depth, but to signify, through the shedding of an incongruous and artificial clothing, nakedness as a *natural* vesture of woman, which amounts in the end to regaining a perfectly chaste state of the flesh.²

But this “*natural*” and “perfectly chaste state” that animates the striptease is difficult to square with Barthes’s contention shortly thereafter that “feathers, furs and gloves go on pervading the woman with their magical virtue even once removed, and give her something like the enveloping memory of a luxurious shell.”³ It is this latter genealogy of displayed skin infused by its coverings that Anne Cheng’s *Second Skin* so brilliantly unfolds to circumvent the contradiction at the heart of the striptease.

That Cheng's book is an important one for scholarship on Baker and architectural theory (especially on Adolf Loos) goes without saying. Because of its critical subtlety and the light touch of its enormous powers of synthesis, however, it might be easy to miss that this is a monumental work of scholarship, making major interventions into critical race theory and modernist studies. Chapter 2 (the introduction is chapter 1) centers on the primal scene of primitivist modernism: Pablo Picasso's visit to the Trocadéro museum in Paris. Juxtaposing this scene with Baker's legendary 1925 Parisian performance, Cheng deploys "Baker as a dynamic fulcrum through which" to reread Picasso's encounter with African art (4). In particular, Cheng seizes on the "categorical confusion" that Baker inspired (the manifest inability to decide whether she was black/white, woman/other, delicious/horrible, human/animal, etc.) in order to open out a similar failure in the Trocadéro of modernist primitivism "to inscribe its own passions" (5). In putting "the negrophilia" (14) of modernist primitivism in dialogue with a history of the modern surface, Cheng asks "is skin—and its visibility—so available?" (7). This question effects a shift in our understanding of race from being, in Franz Fanon's phrase an "epidermal schema," to being a mode of seeing, one that Cheng unpacks throughout her book.

This explication comes in particular in chapters 3–5; these chapters power the theoretical and conceptual engine of Cheng's text. Chapter 3, "Skins, Tattoos, and the Lure of the Surface," magisterially traces a genealogy of the racialized history of the white wall that runs from Gottfried Semper to Adolf Loos to Le Corbusier and continues to operate as an unspoken default in so many apartments and houses today. In order to recover the meanings of this modern surface, Cheng locates an animating tension in Loos's work. Famously in "Ornament and Crime" (1908), Loos rejects ornamentation, comparing it to "the [childish and amoral] tattoos of the Papuan" in order to theorize what Cheng calls "the ideal of the denuded modern surface" (24). However, in his essay "The Principle of Cladding" (1898), Loos writes,

In the beginning was cladding [*Bekleidung*]. . . . The covering is the oldest architectural detail. Originally it was made out of animal skins or textile products. This meaning of the word [*Decke*] is still known today in the German languages. Then the covering had to be put up somewhere if it were to afford enough shelter. . . . Thus the walls were added. . . . [But] cladding is even older than structure. (23)

This opens the conundrum, “what distinguishes cladding from ornamentation?” (28). With this provocative question, Cheng unlocks an alternative history of primitivist modernism—a history that shifts the terrain away from the dichotomy of desire and repression toward the simultaneous operation of these forces. Reading the bedroom that Loos designed for his second wife, Lina, Cheng contends that the Loosian unadorned surface “*hous[es]* the very ‘primitive’ ghosts that it denounces”(32). Cheng calls this simultaneity the modernist “dream of a second skin” (1); the Loosian surface both protects modern man (as George Simmel suggests in “The Metropolis and Mental Life” [1903]) and impersonates the rejected tattooing of the Papuan by theorizing “the building itself . . . as a cover grafted unto the body.” That is, “the desire to *house* the body grows most vitally out of the desire to *be* the body” (54). Cheng’s genealogy represents a major step forward in thinking through the interrelationship of embodiment, sexuality, and architecture—particularly the queer energies of architecture, which remain relatively unexplored.⁴

Chapter 4, “What Bananas Say,” focuses on Baker’s most famous covering—her iconic banana skirt—in order to consider the relationship between buildings and bodies. While Cheng attends to the imperial inscriptions that constitute

both, this chapter explores the ways in which nakedness “confounds” imperial logics (37). Cheng reads “Baker’s relentless self-fetishization” as enabling us to see the failure of “the translation between racial and sexual fetishism” (46). While the sexual fetish “functions for heterosexual men as a kind of psychological lubricant in the face of castration anxiety by making the supposed horror of female castration bearable,” Cheng notes that it is unclear how “the terms of disavowal, displacement, and replacement” would function for the racial fetish (45, 46). In a virtuosic tracking of the multivalent possibilities of the banana skirt, she suggests some of the ways in which these two fetishes are disaligned:

If Baker is seen as offering up a classic spectacle of racialized femininity for the white heterosexual male gaze, then she is also serving up femininity armed with a ring of embarrassingly fruitful phalluses. . . . The effects of that fantasmatic “phallus” on the desiring European audience not only invoke the homoerotic undertones of heterosexual desire but also cross over into the colonial register: one would also have to confront the possibility that this now phallic maternal body holds as well as an uncomfortable affinity to

black masculinity, the “ape” to which the bananas allude. And if one sees the skirt as a domestication of Baker’s jungle ways, then one must also confront the fact that civilized blackness flaunts a set of (flaccid or taut?) bananas. (46–47)

Here, the racial and sexual fetishes “are not merely parallel or additive,” but interrupt, contest, and overwrite each other (46). Rather than being structured by disavowal, the racial fetishist seeks “to *have* and *be* that otherness” (47).

Cheng elaborates this logic of the racial fetish in chapter 5, “Housing Baker, Dressing Loos.” In this chapter, Cheng explores Loos’s design for a planned but never built house for Baker that features an enormous two-story swimming pool at its center (complete with peepholes). Juxtaposing the striped design of Loos’s proposed house with an image of Baker taken in Paris around the same time in which she wears a zebra pattern, Cheng wonders whether Loos’s house is not so much an exploitation of her as it is a simulation: “The dynamics of the Baker House [particularly around the swimming pool] begins to look less like an inscription *about* Baker than an inscription that aims to be *like* Baker (66).” Cheng here effects a shift in the ways that we understand primitivist modernism. Whereas Michael North’s *Dialect*

of Modernism (1994) has teased out the racist implications of such racial impersonation under the sign of the hermeneutics of suspicion, Cheng posits what she will call in chapter 9 the “hermeneutics of susceptibility” (167).⁵ While this discussion is unfortunately truncated in the book, an article version of this chapter understands the hermeneutics of susceptibility to worry over the hermeneutics of suspicion’s tendency to “produce a stable object/subject (reader/text) dyad that is not only illusory but also has blinded us to what might be written on the surface.”⁶ In contradistinction, Cheng offers “a reading practice that is willing to *follow*, rather than suppress, the wayward life of the subject and object in dynamic interface.”⁷ Thus, when Loos creates a house that aims to be *like* Baker, he opens himself and the house to the contamination and frisson of intermingling subject and object. He dares to don a second skin.

Reading across Baker’s photographic and filmic representation, chapters 7 and 8 map the early twentieth century as an era of particular susceptibility to this nexus of subject and object. Cheng argues that “materials like plastics, Bakelite, [and] celluloid promised a new compatibility between the organic and the inorganic” that by the mid-twentieth century signified primarily “things cheap, insipid, and painfully artificial” (117).

This muddling of the animate and the inanimate enables Cheng to begin to reverse or heal Baker's "presumed acquiescence to the objectification of the racialized female body" (119). Rather than locate this agency in Baker's intentions, Cheng sees the representational surface of Baker's skin and its interplay and incorporation of objects around it and enshrouding it as a "frightening-yet-seductive affinity for objectness" (121). This hinge between subject and object is what endows Baker's exhibitionism with its "layered conflation of concealment and exposure, of essence and performance, of flesh and skin." Baker's "nudity" outruns the "scopic regime" of the striptease by enacting "key moments of exposure in her films and photographs" through an "elaborate engagement with both literal and symbolic veils" (58).

Cheng's book closes by meditating on what is at stake on eschewing Baker's interiority to read on the surface; she contends that such a practice "critiques the assumption of authenticity and embodiment utilized by *both* liberal criticism and colonial racism" (161). Expanding this insight, Cheng argues,

She [Baker] is neither the willfully subversive agent that critics hoped for nor the broken subject that history demanded. . . . The "body" of Baker is both more and less than the thing that we

thought. And "it" leads us not to the separation of essence and appearance but to an animated relay between epidermal certitude and stylistic vicissitude in the making of racial legibility. (172)

This conclusion suggests that Cheng's book provides a model for thinking personhood at the border of thing theory. For this insight and many others, this book will be of interest to anyone working in modernist studies, architectural theory, primitivism, critical race studies, gender and sexuality studies, and psychoanalysis. It is a book that shines with all of the radiance of Baker herself and deserves to be read very widely.

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NOTES

1. Roland Barthes, "Striptease," in *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1972), 84–87, quotation on 84.
2. *Ibid.*, 84–85, emphasis in the original.
3. *Ibid.*, 85.
4. For an excellent exception, see Richard Quentin Donald Hornsby, *The Spiv and the Architect: Unruly Life in Postwar*

London (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010). See also Aaron Betsky, *Building Sex: Men, Women, Architecture, and the Construction of Sexuality* (New York: William Morrow, 1995); and Aaron Betsky, *Queer Space: Architecture and Same-Sex Desire* (New York: William Morrow, 1997).

5. Michael North, *Dialect of Modernism: Race, Language, and Twentieth-Century*

Literature, Race and American Culture Series (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994).

6. Anne Anlin Cheng, "Skins, Tattoos, and Susceptibility," *Representations* 108, no. 1 (2009): 98–119, quotation on 100.
7. *Ibid.*, 100–101, emphasis in the original.