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FIGURE 1. Wong holding a red rose. Chester M. Franklin, *The Toll of the Sea* (1922). Frame grab.

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Anna May Wong and the Color Image

HOMAY KING

Film historians have long understood that the aesthetic, formal, and technical origins of cinema cannot be separated from race. D. W. Griffith's *Birth of a Nation* (1915) is credited with inventing or perfecting techniques that became part of the standard grammar of Hollywood continuity editing.[1] Take the technique of cross-cutting between simultaneous plotlines, infamously deployed by Griffith at the film's denouement: it is impossible to ignore that the plotlines in question involve an impending scene of racial violence and a cavalry of Klan members riding in white robes to the rescue of the film's white characters. Similarly, Griffith's innovative use of point-of-view shots and eyeline matches to show Lillian Gish's innocent gaze up at a squirrel takes on additional significance when we realize that our identification with the young white female character is being cinched up just in time for the Gus chase scene and its infamous deployment of racialized narrative in which Black sexual violence is imagined as an omnipresent threat to innocent white women.

In the first part of this essay, I will tell a related story about form's inseparability from content, in this case, color. Like Griffith's editing patterns, which end up stitching Blackness inextricably into the very logic of narrative film structure, so, too, color film stock was associated with racial otherness, pigmentation, and the exotic and foreign. These associations, I suggest, went beyond content; they extended deeper than particular characterizations, casting choices, or storylines. As with *Birth of a Nation*'s editing, color's racializing effects occurred at the very level of cinematic form and

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technology. My example is *The Toll of the Sea*, a 1922 adaptation of the Madame Butterfly story directed by Chester M. Franklin and starring Anna May Wong, the first major Asian American movie star. *The Toll of the Sea* was the first Technicolor film to be widely distributed in general release in the United States.[2] It was made using Technicolor II, a two-color, subtractive process, in which the camera housed a beam-splitter and shot red- and green-filtered exposures onto a single film strip at twice the normal frame rate, with the green one inverted.[3] The two exposures were then separated and recombined in printing with the two positive strips fused together. In 1922 color processing was a new problem for film; its application had not yet been stabilized into a conventional cinematic grammar. Color in *The Toll of the Sea* reflects this lack of stability in several ways. Line and fill are not always perfectly separated, the palette is limited and dominated by shades of red and green, and elements of mise-en-scène such as costuming and set design appear to have been selected with their suitability for color rendering in mind, as if in an experimental process.

In order to think more complexly about how color operates in *The Toll of the Sea*, I draw on Gilles Deleuze's concept of the "color-image" as described in his epic taxonomy of film.[4] Deleuze first mentions this term in a passage from *Cinema 1* during a discussion of the affection-image and the any-space-whatever. Initially he ascribes a "seizing" power to the color-image, attributing to it "an absorbent characteristic [that it] shares with painting. . . . Godard's formula, 'it's not blood, it's red' is *the* formula

LIKE GRIFFITH'S EDITING PATTERNS, SO, TOO, COLOR FILM STOCK WAS ASSOCIATED WITH RACIAL OTHERNESS, PIGMENTATION, AND THE EXOTIC AND FOREIGN

of [the color-image. It] does not refer to a particular object; [rather] it seizes all that happens within its range, a quality common to different objects."[5] Red is not merely an attribute of blood or some other figural object, nor is it a signifier for an affect, such as happiness or rage. Rather, red itself is what is being depicted. Color becomes the primary referent: it absorbs bodies and objects "like a spider's web," such that they are subsumed into its overall design.[6] In an absorbent color-image, color is asserted over and against the image's other possible signifieds, which are now of secondary status.

Like color-images, racial categories have an absorbent, seizing quality. They assert "color" at the expense of the figure or person being depicted. To quote a 1930 *New York Times* reviewer, Anna May Wong is "a jade."[7] Deleuze does not address the potential application of the color-image to race; indeed, mentions of race are notably absent from the cinema

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books aside from an odd passage or two.[8] The usefulness of the concept, adapted to thinking about race, is admittedly limited and requires what some might view as a questionable labor of theoretical rehabilitation. Still, it provides a helpful starting point: a set of metaphors that explain color's strange passages among form and content, ground and figure, and spaces and bodies. It provides a way of understanding color's liquidity, how it seeps across outlines. Deleuze offers an alternate account of the color-image that corresponds to this latter mode in the second volume of the cinema books:

> If Antonioni is a great colorist, it is because he has always believed in the colors of the world, in the possibility of creating them, and of renewing all our cerebral knowledge . . . the world is painted in splendid colors, while the bodies which people it are still insipid and colorless. The world awaits its inhabitants, who are still lost in neurosis. But this is one more reason to pay attention to the body . . . to take tints from it. . . . The body-character with its weariness and its past, and the brain-color with all its future potentialities, [make] up one and the same world.[9]

Here Deleuze attributes a nearly opposite power to color: a redemptive one, the capacity to renew worn-out cerebral knowledge, to overcome the brain-body dichotomy, to re-enchant the world, and to reunite that world with its inhabitants, who are wandering around in isolation.

This second way of understanding color is more in keeping with that implicitly proposed by Darby English in his book *1917: A Year in the Life of Color*. In English's reading, the work of African American abstract and color-field painters "liquefied the national architecture of color, long frozen in the polarizing hypostasis of the black-white relation."[10] Contrary to a common understanding of abstraction as apolitical, disengaged from the world and its peoples or, worse yet, rendering its social ills invisible due to the lack of figuration, English argues that abstraction and color-field painting allowed Black artists to occupy the "modern" moment alongside their white counterparts, thereby rendering the work "hyper-visible [albeit] (mainly *as a problem*)."[11] Abstract painting in color by Black artists, according to this view, poses a double "problem." On the one hand, it challenges the assumptions that abstract painting is the prerogative of white artists and that artists of color are meant to remain in the ghetto of naturalism and figuration. On the other, the use of color disrupts minimalist ideals of sparseness and monochromacy and challenges the supremacy of the color white. As David Batchelor reminds us, "In the West, since Antiquity, color has been systematically marginalized, reviled, diminished and degraded," largely through its persistent association with the primitive and non-western.[12] As English implies, color is thus in some cases a threat: it has the potential to loosen the strictures of the black-white binary opposition, to liquefy frozen categories, or to provide a reminder that the idealized marble white of classical art and architecture is a retroactive fiction.

The Toll of the Sea at times applies color in static, categorical, code-like ways; at others, there is atten-

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tion to color's liquidity and world-expanding potentials. The China revealed by this early Technicolor camera is painted in an exotic riot of pastels, teeming with unnaturally iridescent light pinks and greens. Well before the Oz revealed by the three-strip Technicolor process in 1939, this China feels like an imaginary, candy-colored country: a virtual China, not an actual one. The film's palette recalls the lotus flower for which Wong's character is named in this version of the Madame Butterfly story. Despite the fact that the film unfolds over the course of a year, with seasonal changes clearly indicated by intertitles, in *The Toll of the Sea*, China appears to inhabit a permanent springtime, the frame in perpetual bloom, heavy with wet roses and Japanese cherry blossoms. As Sarah Street and Joshua Yumimbe note, "The film demonstrates how Technicolor took advantage of Orientalist attitudes, which in this case provided a context for the very colors Technicolor II was best at reproducing—reds and greens."[13]

Indeed *The Toll of the Sea* feels like a long excuse for showcasing the new color film technology, as if that goal had been prioritized well above considerations of verisimilitude, consistency, or well-crafted storytelling.[14] I would argue that in this sense the film is a feature-length China Girl: a test image, usually of a female figure holding a color chart, spliced into film leader in order for a projectionist to calibrate the image. As Genevieve Yue has argued, the China Girl suggests an equation of "filmic materiality with femininity, particularly one that is racialized or orientalized."[15] The origins of the term are debated—it may

FIGURE 2. Wong standing on the cliff. Chester M. Franklin, *The Toll of the Sea* (1922). Frame grab.

refer to the frequent clothing of the models in vibrant cheongsams or the notion that they resembled porcelain dolls; another account claims that the first China Girl wore a conical Chinese peasant hat.[16] Regardless, the term appears not to have entered into use until well after 1922, making *The Toll of the Sea* a feature-length proto–China Girl. I also read *The Toll of the Sea* as a feature-length proto-color-image—first in the absorbent sense defined in *Cinema 1*, although later I will suggest that it gets at the second, world-building sense of the term.

The opening shot of the film shows a rocky ocean shore in front of a jade-green sea with lacey white fringes. Lotus Flower runs across the rocks clad in a green robe over a white silk chemise and pantaloons (fig. 2). Her sleeves are festooned with red tas-

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LIKE COLOR-IMAGES, RACIAL CATEGORIES HAVE AN ABSORBENT, SEIZING QUALITY. THEY ASSERT "COLOR" AT THE EXPENSE OF THE FIGURE OR PERSON BEING DEPICTED.

sels. She has spotted something in the water: a man stuck in a tide pool, nearly drowned. She and a group of uncredited Chinese extras rescue the man, who is called Allen Carver in this version. They carry him across the rust-colored rocks to safety. This sequence foreshadows Lotus Flower's own death by drowning in that visually she is practically absorbed by the sea. Because of both the limitations of the two-strip color process and her costuming in shades of green and white that are nearly identical to those of the water and sky behind her, she appears to fade into her surroundings. Here color asserts itself over and against her figure. The phrase "It's not water; it's green" comes to mind. On the one hand, this is a *Cinema 1*–style color-image, asserting jade green at the expense of Anna May and absorbing her into its field. On the other, the image asserts her inextricability from her surroundings and the potential for this green tint to wash onto other shores or seep beyond any given stratified outline, thereby deterritorializing the frame.

Wong undergoes at least eight costume changes in the film. She wears loose-fitting, Christmas-colored silk garments, a Qing dynasty-style bridal costume of an embroidered robe with a scallop-edged capelet, and dangling, jeweled hair combs with tassels that recall those worn in previous centuries by Manchurian noblewomen. The jewels adorn side buns that contemporary viewers would more likely associate with Princess Leia. These are not historically realistic costumes: instead Lotus Flower is an anachronistic international pastiche relative to both the America and the China of her day. She is not of the film's present, belonging to both past and future: a relic of royal dynastic pageantry and an emblem for new, quasi-science-fictional color-imaging technologies (figs. 1 and 3).

Despite the fact that Lotus Flower's primary purpose in the film at times appears to be to serve as a mannequin for these colorful ensembles, *The Toll of the Sea* contains moments that bestow upon her the unexpected capacity to imagine—and even to "enunciate" images, to use Raymond Bellour's terminology.[17] The film gives plentiful point-of-view shots to her. During the section of the film in which she has been left behind in China by Carver, she appears wistfully gazing out to sea, waiting like Penelope for her Odysseus. The images are stitched together in shot–reverse shot patterns that suture the viewer to her perspective. At one point she perks up at the sight of a steamship on the horizon. After a quick vol-

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FIGURE 1. Wong holding a red rose. Chester M. Franklin, *The Toll of the Sea* (1922). Frame grab.

FIGURE 3. Wong in bridal costume. Chester M. Franklin, *The Toll of the Sea* (1922). Frame grab.

ley of shots and countershots, the ship fades from view, having been only a mirage. Here the viewer occupies her point of view not only optically but also subjectively; we partake in her hallucination. Lotus Flower has an interior life that we momentarily share as a perception. Intriguingly, this image suggests that she is as much a projector of fantasy as her lieutenant: if she is for him no more than a painted doll, then he, too, is but a charming image fictitiously projected onto the water.

The Toll of the Sea includes several scenes that are unique among *Madame Butterfly* film adaptations. In one of these, Carver tells Lotus Flower that he has been unexpectedly called back to America. She assumes she will be going with him and rushes to prepare her wardrobe (fig. 4). In an attempt to look American, she dons full Victorian garb. It is a disaster of an outfit from a prior generation. Her look book is thirty years out of date. Lotus Flower is behind the times: this, in the world of the film, as well as of the Madame Butterfly universe in general, is partly what it means to be Asian. In the short story on which the film is based, she is referred to in this scene as a "back number," a slang expression referring to an outdated issue of a magazine.[18] The costume's muted earth tones are out of sync with the film's general aesthetic, belonging more to an 1890 version of Kansas than the Oz-like imaginary China in which the film is set. In Elizabeth Freeman's terms, Lotus Flower is stuck in a form of "temporal drag," invoking "all of the associations that the word 'drag' has with retrogression, delay, and the pull of the past upon the present."[19] But Wong's

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FIGURE 4. Wong in traveling costume. Chester M. Franklin, *The Toll of the Sea* (1922). Frame grab.

cheeky performance inflects her fashion faux pas with irony. She struts regally with her nose in the air. As the test subject for the brand-new two-strip Technicolor film process, she is also paradoxically cutting-edge, a symbol of the medium's future. She is a temporal anomaly, in childlike pink and green at one turn and grandmotherly olive drab the next.

Wong's insouciant performance, though, brings her more fully into the present moment both of her time and, strangely, of ours. As scholars have noted, Wong cannot help but embody the modern woman of the 1920s.[20] In this sequence, it is almost as if we are watching a comedy sketch performed by a contemporary American actress, who is pretending to be Chinese pretending to be American. Her layered performance seems almost to anticipate this character's transformation into M. Butterfly in David Henry Hwang's 1988 rewriting of the Butterfly story. Wong delivers up these routines with a wink of awareness that she is reproducing a cliché, embodying a camp, self-reflexively performative sensibility that would not be entirely out of place in a drag performance.[21]

Like Josephine Baker and others whose options in America were limited by race, economics, and social norms, Anna May Wong briefly joined the expatriate community in Europe and became part of an international avant-garde, where she was muse to photographers and fine artists. In 1928, she met Walter Benjamin, who wrote an essay in which he described her in an evocative sentence: "May Wong—the name

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sounds colorfully margined, densely packed yet light like the tiny sticks that unfold to become a moon-filled, fragrance-less blossom in a cup of tea."[22] This complex metaphor appears to reference a passage from the overture of Proust's *Swann's Way* in which the narrator describes "the game wherein the Japanese amuse themselves by filling a porcelain bowl with water and steeping in it little pieces of paper which . . . stretch and twist and take on color and distinctive shape."[23] Both Benjamin's dried flower unfurling in a tisane and the Japanese novelty water flowers to which Proust refers associate color with potentiality: charming shapes magically take on dimension through immersion in liquid.

A portrait of Wong by photographer Edward Steichen, published in *Vanity Fair* in 1931, pairs her with a large, moonlike blossom (fig. 5). Her face appears next to a white chrysanthemum, mirrored below in a reflective surface, as if they had both bloomed or developed out of its glassy waters. Critic John Raeburn sees the photo as voyeuristic, in part due to the disembodiment of her head, and he reads its staging as unusually surrealistic for Steichen, known more for his naturalism.[24] The disembodied head has a precedent in a title card design from *The Toll of the Sea* (fig. 6). These images might remind one of the parable of Narcissus, who famously drowned while pining after his own reflection, unable to possess it. In Ovid's version of the tale in the *Metamorphoses*, Narcissus does not drown; he simply wanes away and is drained of color, then is changed to a different form—like all the characters in the poem—in this case, a pale white flower. Like Narcissus, the characters Wong played were often brimming with thwarted, unrequited desire: for the love of a foreign lieutenant, as in *The Toll of the Sea*; for fame, as in *Piccadilly* (dir. Ewald André Dupont, 1929); for revenge, as in *Shanghai Express* (dir. Josef von Sternberg, 1932). But unlike Lotus Flower, the sitter in Steichen's photograph does not appear to be at risk of drowning in this inky pool. In some ways, she is more like the Echo character in Ovid's tale than Narcissus. Ovid describes Echo's way of talking as "peculiar": she can only mimic the words of others, like a foreigner repeating without comprehension. Through her repetitions, though, Echo makes these words mean something different. To Narcissus's cry, "Is anybody here?" she replies by repeating only the word "Here!" When Narcissus rebuffs her with the words, "I would die before I give you a chance at me," she replies, "I give you a chance at me."[25]

THE COLOR-IMAGE PROVIDES A WAY OF UNDERSTANDING COLOR'S LIQUIDITY, HOW IT SEEPS ACROSS OUTLINES

Echo eventually retreats into the forest and turns to stone, becoming voice only. She achieves a small pyrrhic victory in this moment, coming to occupy a

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FIGURE 5. Anna May Wong. Photograph by Edward Steichen (1930). © 2021 The Estate of Edward Steichen / Artist Rights Society (ARS), New York.

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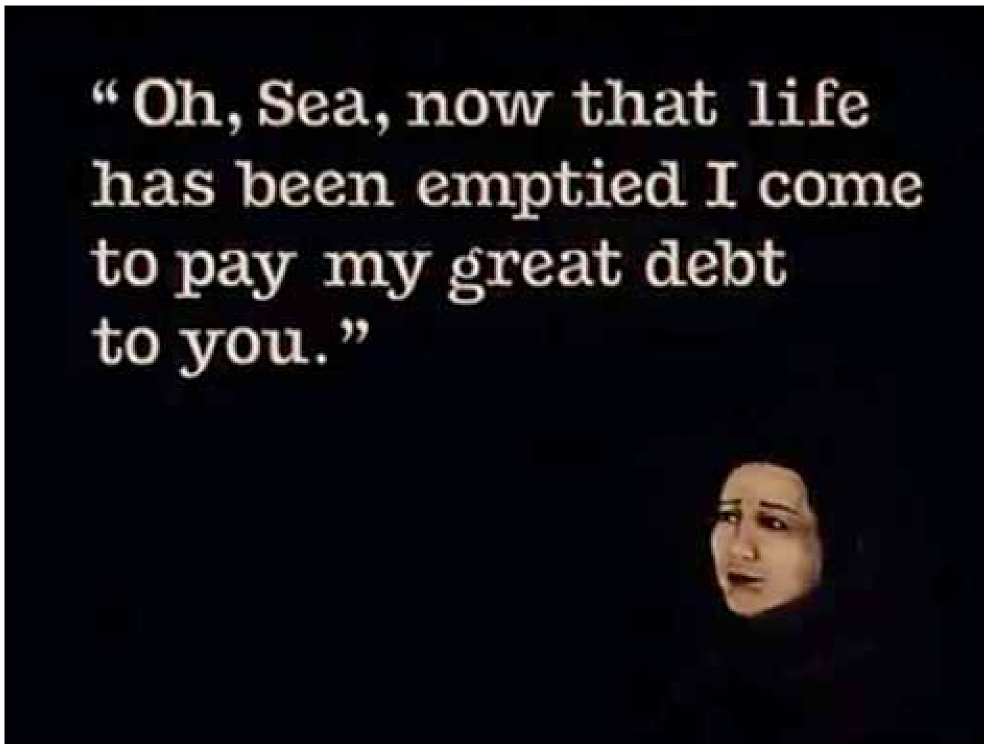

FIGURE 6. *The Toll of the Sea* title card. Chester M. Franklin, *The Toll of the Sea* (1922). Frame grab.

space of enunciation. Anna May Wong's victory is of a similar kind. To insist that she be natural rather than surreal or—in a way, a similar argument—that her stereotyped roles were so restraining that she was never able to properly express herself is to be caught in the butterfly snare. It is to misunderstand that we are viewing an artifact. Butterfly is a fiction, but this does not mean we ought to dismiss her with a wave of the hand. She is not the sole author of her fiction, but nor does this mean she is utterly mute. She is the transformation itself. Like the tedious story she is based on, Butterfly is who she most truly is only when she is changing into something else: adapting, fading, vibrating, and metamorphizing.

By way of conclusion, I turn briefly to a story of another color: golden yellow. My first example is a work of art by Andy Warhol that further takes up and transforms Anna May Wong's legacy and its associations with color. In 1956 Warhol created an exhibition titled "The Golden Slipper Show, or Shoe's Shoe in Amer-

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THE PHRASE "IT'S NOT WATER; IT'S GREEN" COMES TO MIND

ica" at the Bodley Gallery in New York. In it were selections from his series of gold-leaf and gold-colored shoes named after celebrity icons, including Elvis Presley, Zsa Zsa Gabor, and Anna May Wong. Some of these were later published in a *Life* magazine spread headlined "Crazy Golden Slippers." *Life* described the shoes as "made entirely of gold leaf ornamented with candy-box decorations."[26] However, according to Nathan Gluck, Warhol's studio assistant at the time, they were in fact made of a form of fool's gold leaf: bronze leaf or Dutch metal and silver tinsel adhered with Sobo glue.[27] According to one account, Warhol began to use gold and bronze leafing directly after a trip he took with Charles Lisanby to Thailand and Cambodia. Lisanby recalled, "In one of the museums there, [Warhol] saw marvelous pieces of furniture with gold leaf, and then, painting black, leaving areas of gold leaf showing. . . . Since he already had the black line, the blotted-line, he thought of adding the gold leaf. He did all of these things, shortly after that [trip]."[28] If true, Lisanby's story confirms that Warhol's gold-leaf works were inspired in Asia.

As Richard Meyer suggests, the *Life* magazine piece dismisses Warhol's golden slippers as "charming trivialities," positioning them in the sphere of ornamental and decorative art.[29] In a review for *Art News*, Parker Tyler described them as "fetishistic," "naïvely outlined," yet having an "odd elegance."[30] In Meyer's reading, both of these descriptions point to a queer, camp aesthetic without naming it as such; their trivialization of the work is tied to a dismissal of queerness. The choice of adjectives also points to a mode of orientalism based in *chinoiserie* and its association of certain kitsch materials, styles, and colors with Asia.[31] The material in this case is bronze masquerading as a precious metal; the style, flat and iconic yet also somehow gaudy; the color, a golden yellow.

During the Qing Dynasty (1636–1912), imperial yellow was the color of royalty; it could only be worn by the emperor and his highest officials, and its use by the general population was forbidden. At the 2015 Metropolitan Museum of Art Costume Institute Ball, aka the Met Gala, the Barbadian musical artist Rihanna wore an imperial yellow cape and gown designed by Guo Pei, a mainland Chinese fashion designer known for her revival of traditional aesthetics and artisanal techniques. Guo Pei was represented in the exhibition *China: Through the Looking Glass* which opened with the gala: to that exhibition she contributed two dresses, one inspired by blue and white porcelain, the other a shiny gold gown that featured prominently in the museum's Weber Buddha Room. Rihanna's garment is clearly in a dialogue with that gold dress. Her regal yellow cape, styled with a tiara, comments upon the legacy of royal pageantry in an era when little of it remains. In the age of faded

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dynasties, where do the magnificent colors go? When yellowface and yellow peril evoke stain and stigma, how can this color be re-enchanted? How does it take flight into other spheres, avoiding the traps of the absorbent color-image and taking on the revitalizing properties of the color-image that Deleuze describes in *Cinema 2*? As Guo Pei put it, "I think Rihanna and that piece of work have merged together, and she has given the dress a new life."[32] Perhaps this metamorphosis can be thought of as another twist in the story about color that began with *The Toll of the Sea*.

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Notes

1 For more on the problematic status of *Birth of a Nation* and cinema's origins, as well as modes of resistant spectatorship thereto, see Diawara, "Black Spectatorship."

2 The first released Technicolor film was *The Gulf Between* of 1917, which was made using Process 1. It was distributed narrowly and required a special projector to be shown. *The Toll of the Sea* was therefore "the first really successful Technicolor picture and required no attachments on the projector." Leyendecker, "Technicolor Sees Increase." See also Schrader, "Color."

3 See Flueckiger, Timeline of Historical Film Colors.

4 Yiman Wang offered a Deleuzian reading of the celebrity through the concept of the "minor" from *A Thousand Plateaus*. See Wang, "Anna May Wong."

5 Deleuze, *Cinema 1*, 118.

6 Deleuze, *Cinema 1*, 118.

7 Quoted in Russell and Hodges, *Anna May Wong*, 111. The *New York Times* called her "an inscrutably loyal jade" in a review of the play *On the Spot* (1930).

8 Deleuze writes that in *Birth of a Nation* and *Broken Blossoms* (1919), Griffith deploys Black and Chinese characters respectively as threats to "unity." *Cinema 1*, 30–31.

9 Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, 205.

10 English, *1971*, 41.

11 English, *1971*, 8.

12 Batchelor, *Chromophobia*, 22.

13 Street and Yumibe, *Chromatic Modernity*, 100.

14 A reviewer for *Variety* praised Wong's performance but dismissed the use of color as "gimmickry." Russell and Hodges, *Anna May Wong*, 38.

15 Yue, "China Girl," 99.

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16 "Origins of Chinagirl."

17 See Bellour, "To Enunciate."

18 Long, *Madame Butterfly*, 3.

19 Freeman, "Packing History," 728.

20 See, for example, Wang, "Anna May Wong" and "Art of Screen Passing."

21 Wang, "Art of Screen Passing," 173, 176.

22 "May Wong—der Name klingt farbig gerändert, markig und leicht wie die winzigen Stäbchen es sind, die in einer Schale Tee sich zu mondvollen duftlosen Blüten entfalten." Benjamin, "Gespräch mit Anna May Wong," 523 (my translation with help from Imke Meyer).

23 Proust, *Swann's Way*, 51.

24 Raeburn, *Staggering Revolution*, 77.

25 Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 69.

26 "Crazy Golden Slippers," 12.

27 Comenas, "Andy Warhol Pre-Pop."

28 Comenas, "Andy Warhol Pre-Pop."

29 Meyer, *Outlaw Representation*, 107–9.

30 Quoted in Meyer, *Outlaw Representation*, 108.

31 For more on Asian ornament, costume, and mise-en-scène, see King, *Lost in Translation*; King, "Cinema's Virtual Chinas"; and Cheng, *Ornamentalism*.

32 Chung et al., "Chinese Master Couturier."

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