

Lady Trieu, The Matter of Memory, And the Feminist Work of The Surface in Watchmen (2019)

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Abstract: This essay pursues an analysis of form through Lady Trieu, the Vietnamese American villain of Damon Lindelof's hit HBO show *Watchmen* (2019). I argue that a formal reading of Lady Trieu and her mother/daughter Bian reframes the Asiatic woman's complicity and injury within the violent machinations of the U.S. state by pivoting from a politics of presence to a metacritique of historical narration. Rather than theorize an ontology for Asiatic femininity, I argue that the Asiatic woman's recalcitrant materiality—highlighted by Trieu's gleaming, brittle bodily surface and circular genealogy—is the mark of an ontological indeterminacy that unsettles *Watchmen* (2019)'s attempt to absorb the Vietnam War within its reparative narrative of

U.S. empire. By attending to the specificities and recursions of loss, Asiatic femininity's aporetic materiality endeavors in the interpretive task of speculating another world, a hermeneutic labor that conditions the creative reproduction of memory. In, with, and on the Vietnamese American woman, this essay argues, the long and slow violences of the American War in Vietnam return as the trace of the mother: unforgettable, treacherous, undoing the image from its edges. This would be the feminist work of the surface, the formal aesthetic strategy of an insistently materialist Asiatic femininity.

INTRODUCTION

Damon Lindelof's Afrofuturist "remix" *Watchmen* begins in an alternate 2019, 33 years after the concluding events of the 1986 comic book series from which it was adapted.¹ In that original telling, a Pax Americana emerges following a nuclearized American victory in the Vietnam War and the entry of the "fifty-first state" of South Vietnam. Where Moore and Gibson's original comics

followed a cast of superheroes led by the God-like Dr. Manhattan, Lindelof's television adaptation extends that counterfactual world to the present day, where Dr. Manhattan (Yahya Abdul-Mateen II) has disappeared and the benevolent force of U.S. democracy, bereft of its symbolic leader, struggles to reconcile itself with the antiblack racism upon which it was built.² In the place of Dr. Manhattan, *Watchmen* (2019) presents the Black, South Vietnam-born vigilante policewoman Angela Abar (Regina King) as the next superheroic face of the nation. The series follows Abar as she battles the capitalist technocrat Lady Trieu (Hong Chau) and a white supremacist organization named the Seventh Kalvary, all the while uncovering the painful history of her own family genealogy, spread across the Jim Crow South and the 51st state of South Vietnam.

If the original *Watchmen* series captured the self-fashioning narrative of Cold War-era U.S. empire—a “liberal” power that sought to protect the world from the threat of nuclear war—the televisual adaptation probes the unfinished questions of multiculturalism that underwrite and sustain U.S. empire's moral claims to benevolence. Inquiring after the regenerations of antiblack violence that coemerge with U.S. state power, the 2019 *Watchmen* establishes itself at the repetitious sites of annihilation—the U.S. South and Southern Vietnam—which earmark U.S. state power's continually unresolved crisis of legitimacy.

Lindelof has been explicit about the moral reckoning at stake in *Watchmen* (2019).³ The show's release coincided with a decade-long unfolding of national demonstrations against police brutality that inspired concomitant rearticulations of Black power and anti-imperialist politics. Accordingly, *Watchmen* (2019)—which concludes with Angela Abar's triumphant ascension to the mantle of U.S. power—has been earnestly celebrated as an “Afrofuturist and feminist” articulation of Black history that creatively exposes the nation's genealogy of white supremacist violence.⁴ Celebrations of the show, however, struggle to attend to the show's villain, the Vietnamese American “trillionaire” Lady Trieu, whose pitched struggle with Abar for Manhattan's powers culminates in her spectacular and seemingly inconsequential death. That both the Vietnamese American woman and the American War in Vietnam could be so easily conjured and disappeared, Viet Thanh Nguyen has poignantly noted, attests to *Watchmen*'s “reluctance to grapple with America's imperial power and its entwinement with white supremacy.”⁵ Similarly, Elaine Castillo, assessing the efficacy of the show's anti-racist didacticism, mourns the instrumentalization of Lady Trieu and her mother as caricatured collaterals, permitting a disavowal of the entanglement between racial warfare across U.S. empire's domestic front and foreign frontiers.⁶

At an angle from both representational critiques and celebrations of the show, I argue that a formal reading of Lady Trieu and her mother/daughter Bian in *Watchmen* (2019) reframes both the Asiatic woman's complicity and injury within the machination of the U.S. state. A study of form allows us to pivot from a politics of representation to a metacritique of historical mediation touched off by the *Watchmen* universe's recursive reference to the materiality of the Asiatic woman. Building on Asian Americanist critiques that have emphasized the

entanglements between anti-Black, anti-Indigenous, and anti-Asian violence within the context of U.S. settler empire, this essay grapples with the deathly trajectory of the Asiatic women in *Watchmen*, who pose a problem not only for racial representation but for the hermeneutics of materialist critique.⁷

Accordingly, I look beyond Lady Trieu's function as a symbolic disavowal of U.S. imperialism and warfare in Southeast Asia, toward the apparently brute and spectacular mattering of the Vietnamese American woman's gleaming, then punctured surfaces.⁸ As my analysis of *Watchmen* (2019) demonstrates, form and materiality are bound by the force of contingency, animating the dynamic vision of matter articulated by recent scholarship on new materialisms.⁹ While such scholarship has embraced the precognitive force of affect as the immediate representing of matter and as an exit door to the project of human exceptionalism, I suggest that to take seriously the speculative and vital premises of new materialisms, one must reject the ontology of matter and embark on a project of interpretation: of struggling against given frameworks of meaning imparted (or thought to be imparted) by matter, attending to the pulses of form.¹⁰ Hence, by pursuing the Asiatic woman's death (Lady Trieu's among them) as a materialist and formal problem for the question of historical narration—in particular, the narrativization and conceptualization of the United States—this essay proposes an Asian Americanist feminist materialism as a matter of hermeneutics: of (re) reading for the contingencies of form and forms of contingency within *Watchmen* (2019) that disrupts the show's sedimented narrative and settled scores, returning us to the recalcitrant and inescapably recursive terms of the United States' creative violence.

In the spirit of a reading that unsettles and surprises, I apprehend the unexpected forces of U.S. state violence coursing through the bodily forms of *Watchmen* (2019). The first section teases out the representational work of Black femininity as a vehicle for the moral redemption of the U.S. state, while the second section turns on the coherence of this self-evident reading by raising the Asiatic woman as an indispensable supplement to the Black woman within the show's re-narration of U.S. empire. To what Erica Edwards has called the imperial grammar of Black femininity, I propose the settler imperial grammar of Asiatic femininity, which names the shifting formations of US state power made known through the Asiatic woman's circular returns and violent ejections from both *Watchmen* (2019) and the original comics.¹¹ The third section reads the rhythm of Asiatic femininity's recursive materialization as a trace of the US state's creative, recombinatory violence. I engage theories of Asiatic femininity to read Trieu's insistently brittle bodily surface, whose ontological indeterminacy proposes hermeneutics of suspicion that unsettles *Watchmen* (2019)'s narrative of U.S. settler empire. The final section tracks the recursive labor of interpretation necessitated by Asiatic femininity beyond the figure of Lady Trieu and the locus of her body. I conceptualize the labor of recursion as an anti-imperialist hermeneutic of an Asiatic mothering that, by attending to the specificities and recursions of loss, endeavors in the speculation of another world, an interpretive and mnemonic labor through war's long present.

Our aim is to represent the supersession of representational politics: by ferreting out the contradictions latent to *Watchmen* (2019)'s settled meanings, we pursue what might be suggested or speculated by the text despite authorial intention. The Vietnamese American woman, we will show, serves as a symbol that would, on the one hand, obfuscate U.S. imperial might as Oriental despotism through her own keen and inscrutable face and at the same time, index, on that same truculent face, a frustrating shine, glint, and prick that sunders attempts to ontologize the Asiatic and the feminine, returning us to a site of opacity that ne-cessitates reinterpretation and memorialization. Decomposing and recomposing historical meaning, the visual forms of the Vietnamese woman excavate the live forces of racial warfare which render the image rippling with the specificity of loss. Figured not as substance but the insubstantial flickers of light and shadow, the problem of Trieu's body (her muted gleam, silky silhouette, sundered hole and caulked lines) proposes a non-ontological materiality whose aporetic reach invites reading. Her face resurfaces, on the surface of Asiatic femininity's racial and gendered meaning, those memories of the War which the myth of U.S. empire would like to eject with/as the meaningless explosion of Vietnam. In, with, and on the Vietnamese American woman, this essay argues, the long and slow violences of the American War in Vietnam return as the recursive loop of maternal memory: a reproductive labor mediated by treachery, undoing the image from its edges. This would be the feminist work of the surface, the formal aesthetic strategy of an insistently materialist Asiatic femininity.

THE GRAMMAR OF BLACK FEMININITY

Let us begin, then, with U.S. settler empire's strange powers of mutability, incorporation, regeneration, and self-destruction, captured in the relationship between the show's protagonist, policewoman Angela Abar, and the villainous capitalist Lady Trieu. When they meet each other, knee-deep in Lady Trieu's tropical laboratory in Tulsa (a purposeful recreation of the Vietnamese jungle), the scene feels almost predetermined, signaling a convergence between the

U.S. South and Southern Vietnam, two nodes across the vast stretch of U.S. settler empire.¹² The Black woman and the Vietnamese woman's uncanny meeting in Tulsa, in Vietnamese, sets a scene contorting with the torrential and violent animations of a U.S. settler empire straddled between Tulsa and Saigon, between the long afterlife of enslavement and the compromised memory of imperial war.¹³ By tracking the afterlife of anti-Black violence across Abar's family, from the Tulsa Massacre, where Abar lost her great-grandparents, to Saigon, where she lost her veteran parents, Lindelof's show strings together the illicit scenes of U.S. state power, assembling a reimagined archive of its illegitimate consecration through the generations of Black labor and/as Black soldiering that marshalled the pillars of the American temple. If natal alienation, as Orlando Patterson writes, names the ways by which chattel slavery choreographed the social and historical abjection of the slave—a "secular excommunication" that foreclosed the enslaved from "all rights or claims of

birth,” an abortion not just of family but social and historical life—Watchmen (2019) imagines a natal rehabilitation for the Black American daughter, now mother, who emerges back into social life through state-recognition, anointed the new commander-in-chief and spiritual guardian of the most powerful nation on earth.¹⁴

The political utility of a Black woman superheroine such as Angela Abar lies in her ability to absolve the U.S. of its crimes and thus smoothen the contradictions of state power. Rendered both the threat and antidote to the future of U.S. security, she is the insubordinate, then righteous renegade, a counterinsurgent Black mother who secures the future of U.S. global leadership. In the symbol of Angela Abar, one is privy to the mythification of U.S. state power coordinated by Watchmen (2019)’s ventriloquism of Black feminism. Erica Edwards attributes such mythification to the codified “imperial grammar of Blackness,” in which the strategic inclusion of “Black achievement, Black suffering, and Black resistance” within U.S. imperial cultural productions function to rationalize “U.S. imperial violence abroad.”¹⁵ Such an imperial grammar is stridently on view through Abar, whose presence accounts for the U.S.’s antiblack genesis and gestures, through her rise to power, at a moral reckoning with its afterlife.

To speak, as Watchmen (2019) does, of Angela Abar’s intertwined Black soldiering and Black mothering—indeed, of her Black soldiering as Black mothering—is to confirm the productivity of Black femininity’s imperial grammar.¹⁶ Put differently, Abar’s productive labor in securing racial justice does double duty as reproductive labor—her mothering scales across the nuclear family to the nuclearized state, sanctioning the political reproduction of a properly repentant, morally rehabilitated U.S. empire. Further, her legitimacy is staked not on historical victimhood, but her living experience as a historical subject, her flesh-deep understanding of the errors of U.S. statecraft, from familial casualties who have served as the keepers of what Edwards calls “the other side of empire” and its illicit scenes of consecration.¹⁷ The show concludes with Abar’s messianic performance of motherhood, one that enshrines her salvation of a morally-purified imperial power: following the spectacular elimination of her rival, Lady Trieu, Abar “inherits” Dr. Manhattan’s nuclear abilities and walks, Christ-like, on water, before the screen cuts to black.¹⁸

THE SETTLER IMPERIAL GRAMMAR OF ASIATIC FEMININITY

Yet to contend with the imperial grammar of Black femininity is also to contend with its recalcitrant supplement, which, in Watchmen (2019), is Asiatic femininity. If the politically (re)productive work of Black motherhood is mediated by Abar’s dutiful renewal of an American futurity, Lady Trieu’s mothering would be the stark image of anti-reproductivity and anti-normativity, a threat to the democratic security offered by Abar. Indeed, Trieu’s quest for political recognition and familial reconciliation remains permanently suspended by her tenuous relationships to both mother and father, motherland (Vietnam) and fatherland (the United States). Her vexed familial bonds correspond with the

trope of the tragic métis in twentieth century French literature, as literary scholar Marguerite Nguyen describes: artificially conceived by her mother, Bian, and rejected by her American father, Veidt, Trieu is cast out of the proper telos of racial-national belonging, exiled from imperial father/land and figured as morally and sexually pathological by her cyclically self-reproducing relationship with her mother, whom she clones into her “daughter.”¹⁹

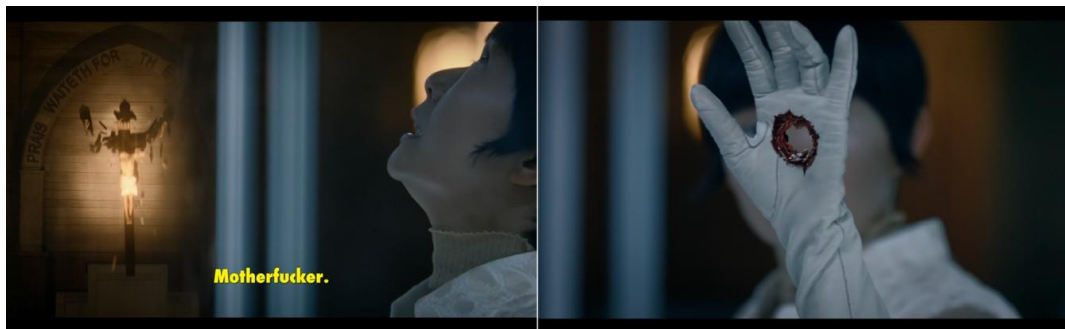
A distinctly twenty-first century character, Lady Trieu’s emergence in the latest installment of the Watchmen franchise enshrines a concern with Asiatic racial form that connects the dawn of the “new Cold War” with the epistemic concerns of the twentieth century Cold War depicted in the original Watchmen comics.²⁰ If Asiatic racial form in the social history of the twentieth century has signaled the “representation of the unrepresentable,” its present iteration redeploys the inscrutable and treacherous front of the Asiatic woman as a convenient foil for the deceitful operations of the U.S. settler imperial state.²¹ More than just a sign of U.S. settler imperialism’s internal contradictions, however, Asiatic racial form in Watchmen (2019) is underscored by its placement before a “horizon of death.”²² Remarkably, Trieu must not only be killed, but her spectacular death—showered by a storm of bullets—must be made to represent the unambiguous achievement of moral justice under a U.S. state rehabilitated by the figure of the counterinsurgent Black mother. Yet catenated remains trouble the Asiatic woman’s ejection from settler empire, much as Trieu’s death in Watchmen (2019) performs an anamnestic recall of another death from the original graphic novel, suggesting that the Asiatic woman is a figure who is not one. Caught in the middle volume of the 1987 Watchmen comics is another Vietnamese woman: the pregnant mistress of the volatile Captain America- doppelganger “The Comedian.” On a bruised and brutish American base in the jungle thicket of Indochine, the mother-to-be asks The Comedian to take responsibility for their child. “You [would] walk away from this?” she taunts him. “I think you [will] remember me and my country.”²³ He looks at her with disgust and unceremoniously shoots her in the chest. Her death, scarcely nine panels after her first appearance, is jarring, queasy, signaling an anxious abortion both of war’s memory and the alterities of its afterlives, uncontainable like the curved lines of her body spilling out of from the gun that anchors the panel’s composition.



Watchmen (1987) ’ s unnamed Vietnamese woman.

There is no way to read Lady Trieu, nor Lindelof's "remixed" future outside of the chain of explosions set off by these cluster bombs, the ringing shot, the splattered blood of the anonymous Vietnamese mother and the whorl of fire cascading around her. By reviving the memory of Vietnam only to annihilate it again with Lady Trieu's death, *Watchmen* (2019) stakes itself as one more bullet, one more grenade flung at the Vietnamese woman's lying corpse. "Motherfucker," Trieu says as she dies: the curse of the Vietnamese mother will rage on, beneath the self-invention of the U.S. state.

As if a sly smile turned on its own shadow, *Watchmen* (2019) coordinates the visual splendor, sinks the ingenious hilt of spectacle, upon the insistently, all-too-material body of the Vietnamese woman, a dense cypher of U.S. settler imperial history. This time, it convinces us, it will spend the political currency of the Vietnamese woman's death on a proper cause: Saigon must remain fallen, so that the United States can right its wrongs. The telos of American history bends toward an attempted disclosure: the closure of Trieu's death and Angela Abar's dispatch to leadership, salvaging the moral legitimacy of U.S. democracy.



Final moments of Lady Trieu ("See How They Fly," 2019, 51:11)

Instrumentalizing a schematic antagonism between the Black and Asiatic woman, the repair that the show finally offers Abar—of political leadership and co-authorship of the imperial story—is, I wager, largely a symbolic one.²⁴ Abar's Black soldiering-turned-Black mothering for and of the U.S. state promises a speculative justice-to-come on the basis that the Black woman's political and fleshly labors might rejuvenate-and-revise the cultural logics which once conscripted her womb as factory; it assumes that by making her a surrogate of the future of American democracy, she might write herself, might write us all, out of the long afterlife of slavery. This parasitic utilization of the Black woman's (re)productive labor to re-mythify U.S. empire elucidates not only the imperial grammar of Black femininity but, crucially, readies the figure of the Black woman for what Zakkiah Jackson has called the "praxis" of plasticity—instrumental conscriptions that, by "fluidif[ying] life and fleshly existence," functions to render black(ened) flesh generative of political, sexual, and bodily form. That is to say, the figure of Angela Abar brings together the grammar and plasticity of Black femininity: her political instrumentality derives from the extraordinary capacity assigned to her to bear, vessel, and shepherd the future of the U.S. state.²⁵ At the same time, however, because Abar's succession is premised solely on the brutalizing death of Lady Trieu, *Watchmen* (2019) probes the limit internal

to theories of Black femininity which cannot account for the racialization of the Asian “American” woman.²⁶ Troubling but ultimately complementing the plasticity of Black feminine grammars, the Asiatic woman’s re-entries (from *Watchmen* [1986] to *Watchmen* [2019]), this essay argues, elucidates an anagrammatical language of violence in which the U.S. state energetically modulates its forms of domination through difference and repetition.²⁷

If Angela Abar’s symbolic rehabilitation of U.S. empire attests to what Edwards calls the imperial grammar of Black femininity, I argue that it is the settler imperial grammar and concomitant brittleness of Lady Trieu’s Asiatic femininity (and anti-reproductive mothering) that serves as the constitutive supplement to Abar’s imperial (re)productivity. Where the imperial grammar of Black femininity names the processes by which U.S. empire ventriloquizes its self-renewal through the “creative endurance” of Black femininity and its ability to “live on the jagged edge between terror and vitality,” the settler imperial grammar of Asian American femininity names the creative recombination of U.S. state power that leaves its trace through the Asiatic woman’s returns.²⁸ The brittleness of Asiatic femininity, evinced by Trieu’s punctured body, conjures the Asiatic woman’s enduring approximation to aporetic materiality rather than plastic flesh, making her a vehicle of unruly fragmentation (and anagrammatical recombination) rather than vital generation.²⁹ As settler imperialism conjugates both imperialism and settler colonization—the imperialist “humanitarian” U.S. wars in Asia prescribing an extension and modulation of its settler colonization of North America—so too does the Vietnamese woman’s returns in *Watchmen* conjugate the imperial grammars of Blackness, apprehending the United States not merely as empire nor settler empire but as a structure suspended in utero an unsettled concept visible only as the recursive shudderings of form.³⁰

A question, then: Through what terms can we apprehend the (returned, rehearsed, represented) corpse of the Asiatic woman?

An answer, the long way around: Through a formal reading that reveals the competing forces at play within the diegetic emplotment of history—one, tendered by Lindelof, tending toward resolution, succession, continuity; the other, shaken loose by the Vietnamese woman’s forms of desecration, that veers toward melancholy, accretion, and a primary recursion encircling the shape of an absence.

THE MATERIALITY OF THE SURFACE

Into the absence, then. We first meet Trieu in the opening scene of episode four, shrouded in the gray-cold darkness of night. It is 2019 on a chicken farm in Oklahoma, and we are in the home of the Clarks, a middle-aged, unassuming white couple who’ve struggled for years to conceive a child. “The front door opens to reveal a WOMAN standing there...mysteriously silhouetted by the HEADLIGHTS of an unseen vehicle in the front driveway.”³¹ Trieu is visiting the home of the Clarks, propositioning a trade: an egg for an egg; their farm for a baby she has secretly created with their genetic material. When they hesitate,

she ups the ante: “Ten seconds [to sign] or I’ll have no choice but to destroy the baby,” she declares, and as they look at her, agape with horror, “Guys, I’m joking. I’ll find a loving home for him. He’ll just never know where he came from.”³² Taunting the Clarks with the possibility of a severed bloodline, Trieu animates an alluring notion of legacy rooted in heterosexual reproduction and lineal descent, orienting her as a regressive force within the show’s broader themes of queer genealogy, interracial kinship, and neoliberal multiculturalism, indexed by Angela Abar’s queer, mixed-race nuclear family. Yet Trieu’s near-fanatical vision of legacy is undercut by her own non-reproductivity: her family line, as elucidated, is indexed by duplicity and dizzying repetition. Just as Trieu was illicitly and artificially conceived by her mother, Bian, a Vietnamese refugee who stole and injected herself with the semen of the American Adonis Adrian Veidt, Trieu leverages her innovations in biotechnology to clone her mother, passing her off as daughter.

The circularity of this genealogy discloses a lack about Trieu. Her rotary bloodline absents her of presence, casts her in the shadow of the negative: she appears, in the script and on the screen, as a shadow—a “silhouette” illuminated by the floodlights of an unseen vehicle. But wispy shadow quickly hardens into dense materiality, suggesting something slippery and resistant in Trieu’s metatextual labor. As she strides into the Clarks’ living room, then sits across from them, sheathed in a white geometric cape, every inch of her body is covered, save her round, gleaming face, which the camera lightly grazes as she makes an offer on the house.

Like a lighthouse in the distance, Trieu’s gleam invites spectatorship. In numerous interviews, Joanne Kasperlick, HBO Watchmen’s costume designer, describes the hardened luminosity after which she sought to shape Trieu’s physical appearance. “I was imagining,” Kasperlick recounts, “What would a praying mantis wear as her coat?” Here, style silvers into signification: How could she “sculpt” Trieu’s costume, Kasperlick asks, around actress Hong Chau’s face



Lady Trieu’s threat (“If You Don’t Like My Story, Write Your Own” 2019, 4:25)

“like a sphere,” using signature colors of white and grey? Trieu is hardness cast, a concept architected around an uncertain core: “There is a purity” in those colors, Kasperlick muses. “I didn’t want her to be overly exposed. I wanted to

entice the mystery of what we don't know about her. What is she hiding? Why does she wear gloves?"³³

The hardened surface of Trieu's cape parallels the hardened exoskeleton of the praying mantis. With her body devastatingly repressed in a carapace, Lady Trieu appears brittle, (im)penetrable. She is a melancholic figure, "hiding" something "we don't know": could that something be a secret set of alliances, perhaps a suspect attachment to enfleshment, or a dubious commitment to human life itself arising from her own insecure humanity—those gloved hands suggestive of an iron fist; an exoskeletal claw; a horrible disfiguration; an absence?

Trieu's hardened surfaction is underscored by Kasperlick's choice to sheath her in a monochromatic cape, whose cascade glimmers with a marble-like quality. In her smooth and brittle expanse, she resembles a cask at once rigid and malleable, an object sculpted by invisible hands deracinated from the origin and conditions of labor. The praying mantis, as the film scholar Andrew Dudley writes, has historically served as a sign of the alien violence which lives in the Orient; at the same time, however, its impervious shell can be conquered via aesthetic dehiscence, hollowed from within and mounted as taxidermized décor.³⁴ To say that Trieu is brittle, following the thin glower of light on her face, is to invoke not just the figurative capacity of her eventual fragmentation as an alibi for settler empire, but to point to the insistent inscrutability that the material surface conjures. To call her brittle is also to notice, in quite a literal way, the flat, smooth plane of Trieu's attire and the frosty glow of her silver skin that inspires simultaneous impenetrability and a too-dense weightiness threatening to fold in on itself.

What to do with this weight, which conjures ontology but resists its disclosure? In *Ornamentalism*, a theory of the "aesthetic ontology" of the yellow woman, Anne Cheng notes that the supplementary thingliness of Asiatic femininity inspires a beautiful inconsequentiality subject to endless plunder, a sense of continual availability for consumption and disposal. In short, ornamental Asiatic femininity authorizes an aestheticized mode of violence that the Asiatic woman (she/it) endures without grimace.³⁵ Yet, in *Watchmen* (2019), brittle thingliness offers its own consequentiality—for grimace, glower, and see the Trieu does: the insistent materiality of her surface forces us to push past the limit of Cheng's analysis and ask how the thingly qualities of Asiatic femininity might offer, in its own strange material way, a resistance that reroutes disposal and explodes explosion, returning us to an opaque historicity and recalcitrant labor of reading that chokes the beautiful consumption of the Asiatic woman's inconsequential death, her golden glow.

Citing Anna May Wong's "golden-skinned" shine in *Piccadilly* (1921), Anne Cheng suggests that the provisional source of the Asiatic woman's performative and erotic withholding conjures a fantasy of interiority. But our reading of Trieu tweaks this formula: her reflective attire and coldly gleaming face hiccups Asiatic femininity's "lure of shine." In lieu of the lure, there is a thin brittleness crusting into ontological uncertainty. If, in Cheng's celebrated account, "ornamentality" names the ontological mode by which Asiatic femininity's inorganic

matter conjures and then displaces flesh, the intractable inscrutability of Trieu's face disrupts this operation of substitution, appealing instead to an insistent, yet ontologically-indeterminable materiality. That is, if the ornament names Asiatic femininity's representation of the "inhumanness of the human," its symbolic power comes at the behest of a permanently deferred encounter with the opaque, aporetic materiality of the Asiatic woman herself. Ornamentalism's failure lies in the fact that, despite a professed commitment to the "material," it ironically apprehends materiality only within an enclosed symbolic order. The Asiatic woman who "lives as a thing" is never the actual thing itself, but the reanimated myth of her essential inhumanity in the nook of a self-enclosed settler imperial fantasy.³⁶

Flip it a different way: though it highlights the Asiatic woman's evocative supplementarity as inorganic matter, ornamentalism ultimately forecloses an apprehension of Asiatic femininity's crucial thingliness—matter's ability, to tweak Bill Brown's words, to swerve anthropocentric regimes of meaning, attesting to the instability of racial myth and the ongoing possibilities of Asiatic femininity's re-signification.³⁷ While *Watchmen* (2019) would like to jettison Trieu as fodder, the strangely dense and textured outlines of her face and body force us to ask after the capacitating forms of matter—the formal potentialities opened by her thingliness, which turn us away from given epistemic frames toward the unfinished historical vectors along which the Asiatic woman takes shape.³⁸ And, maybe, the very idea of the Asiatic woman as a settled, transparent figure—either racial subject, object, or ornament—is what Trieu's round, gleaming face interrupts.

Trieu invokes the shiny literalism of a bug carapace. Rather than redirecting eros and sustaining fantasy on the surface (as Cheng reads Anna May Wong), Trieu's gleam—and the all-too-weighty cusk of her body at which the gleam gestures—animates a chilling uncertainty around her relationship to human life and flesh. Not a desiring and desired surface ensconced in light, the immaterial substance of racial fantasy, Trieu's face is insistently material, an ornery representation of matter that drags the desirable "person-thingness" of Asiatic femininity to the ground of its absolute otherness.

On Trieu, fantasy cannot sustain itself; it is overcome by the brittleness of her (shell-like) skin, which appears as an irradiated plane that absorbs light and reissues only a gleam.³⁹ This material surface entraps intensity immanent to itself. Where shine denotes that which is "of a heavenly body" or "the face of God," gleam, from the Germanic *glime*, references the glow-worm, and that which is close to and of the ground, the base.⁴⁰ To call Trieu's face a gleam rather than the "shine" Cheng imputes to the ornament is to stay close to the exoskeletal materialism of the object itself. Rather than mediate the enclosed symbolic realm of what Cheng calls Asiatic femininity's "animated objectness," Trieu's brute materiality—deadening racial myth, but not dead in itself—swerves past the limit of settler empire's circumscribed episteme.⁴¹ No mere ornament, Trieu's shiny literalism constitutes an irradiated and unstable base that threatens

to explode the given, static racial meaning of Asiatic femininity as the beautifully inconsequential ornament.

Unlike Anna May Wong, who at once thrills and blinds the Piccadilly dance hall (permitting Cheng's reading of shine as a gesture of withholding, stranding fantasies of the Asiatic woman's subjectivity on the surface), Trieu beckons the eye to wander over her, to attempt to peel into her, before brutally truncating the operation structuring sight: Trieu's impervious face is too slippery for any concept to attach itself securely. At stake here is not a question of the Asiatic woman's uncertain subjectivity (and the "idiosyncratic and intense exchange between thingness and personness" that Cheng claims she inflects) but the implausible representational schemas of materiality itself. Meaning slides off Lady Trieu, for she deflects ontological designation; by foreclosing access to fantasies of her interiority, the materialism of her face steps aside from the epistemic frames one might try to attach to it. However, the refusal or evasion of meaning is another meaning itself: unlike Anna May Wong, alluring in her person-thingness, a gleaming Trieu appears to us caulked in certain illegibility, an all-too-material surface that remains anxious to its own inscrutability, the effete grip of meaning. The ontologically-indeterminable materiality of the surface offers a riddle for reading.

Not a radiant surface but a gleaming afterthought, Trieu's resistance to reading frustrates: her inscrutability foreshadows her eventual demise as an impervious surface so dense with possible meaning and no meaning at all that it recursively anticipates its own piercing, the violence a litmus test of the conceptual weight that matter can carry—a taxidermy, if you will. Cheng calls the Asiatic woman's incitation of injury as a perverse "aesthetic privilege" that animates her strangely "thingly personhood"; Leslie Bow, following Sianne Ngai's theory of the cute, understands the Asiatic object's peculiarly cute ability to withstand injury as an aestheticization of racist hate.⁴² Here, however, I am proposing something different—the brutalizing state violence inflicted upon the Asiatic woman responds to a reading of her insistently and inscrutably material surface, one that resists and reroutes the politically productive fantasies of injury ascribed to Asiatic femininity.⁴³

Trieu as a gloweringly unreadable cypher, brought to the fore by Kasperlick's metaphor of the praying mantis, partially evades imperial culture's epistemic frames. Her/its opacity frustrates, and the same time suggests a wealth of undivulged meaning. To the frustrated reader as to the anxious grip of imperial culture (for whom the world is either a subordinate or an enemy condemned to death), the Asiatic woman's insistently material surface invites handling, a self-justifying taxidermization that plumbs the depths of what the material koan of her being might mean: both empire's self-reflection, a sign of the enemy, and nothing at all.

The teasing flicker of nothingness, a resistance to the assumptions of the Asiatic woman's given ontology (subject, object, ornament): this is what Trieu's "mysterious silhouette" in our opening scene imparts. Her emergence into the scene is bracketed by both a surfeit and an excess of materiality—an outline in

the darkness turned into an impenetrable mask. Etienne de Silhouette, the seventeenth century French politician and author, is the namesake of the silhouette, which first emerged as a shorthand to mock the “petty economies” he introduced but which stuck as a reference to the outline portraits the aristocrat made and used to decorate his chateau.⁴⁴ That we now know the silhouette as a “dark outline, a shadow in profile” and as the “contour or outline of a garment” attests to the peculiar failure of the term: it does not conjure presence but captures only the reflexive act of representation itself.⁴⁵ From the silhouette emerges neither de Silhouette, nor the persons in his portraits, nor a (or any) profile and garment, but only the outline, the line, which instead of proffering presence offers presence’s limit by way of a hollow mark through which presence ceases. The silhouette: a trace hinged on an absent center.

Lady Trieu’s inscrutable materiality resists a reading of the metaphysics of presence but her silhouette opens the wily recursions of the line, another name for the thingliness that evades capture. On Lady Trieu, we read not the ontology of the Asiatic woman but the writing of visual and narrative form itself: the figural lines and lineaments of plot that fail to rend being but curry the aftershock of the War as a force that reflexively unsettles its inscription of the Asiatic woman. *Watchmen* (2019) struggles against the line, which is to say it struggles to seize authoriality, to bend the vectors of history to its will. It wants to control the line—to excavate the heroism of Angela Abar’s family line in order to map anew the outline of U.S. settler empire—but the para-concept of the line is treacherous, inasmuch as its permission of measurement and representation is undergirded by an ineluctable force of becoming. The line swerves—⁴⁶

On the brittle surface of Lady Trieu’s face, it bends, angles, and turns, so that Trieu becomes a problem for the architecture of *Watchmen*’s historical plot, the line that refuses to be scripted into futurity. On Trieu, the line does not straighten and consequently, materiality struggles to signify, to comport presence within the static shape of historical revision that would tarry it into the captivity of the sentence, of narrative delineation, of the image that would comport satisfying historical truth. Figured not as substance but the insubstantial flickers of light and shadow, the muted gleam and the rippling silhouette, the sundered hole and caulked line, Trieu proposes a non-ontological materiality that can and must be read for form.

If Abar’s “queer” family genealogy, importing an unbroken line through the long twentieth century, vehicularizes the history of U.S. settler empire as a teleological march into something that looks like “racial progress,” Trieu’s genealogy, artificial and recursive, like the unsettling silhouette and irradiating gleam of her face, teases presence but re-loops the specificity of loss. The strange, self-replicating relationship between the daughter and mother who would be a “daughter of her daughter” speaks to the logic of myth, whose impoverished history rewrites cause and effect, staking itself as “natural, eternal justification”; myth, as Spillers writes, as “frozen time.”⁴⁷

Yet in the re-loop, something is repeatedly set into motion only to wound up where it started. And where does the loop start? For Trieu as for *Watchmen*

(2019), the question of priors and of origins is a harrowing one: without it, no future can be speculated, but contending with the sheer weight of settler empire's (an)original violences means contending with the rupture of linearity and the risk of becoming stuck, of peering into an abyssal infinitude where meaning does not cohere and repair does not occur and the story does not move. This abyssal infinitude, the black hole of settler empire's anoriginal point, crops up inconveniently in/as the curse of Trieu's recursive invocation of the American War across the diegetic space of *Watchmen*—the fixed rotation of the mother/daughter dyad that sounds a formal echo of the original comics' anxious abortion in the thickets of My Lai, the (non)event which never ends. The center is missing, but the line persists: the child never becomes, the womb strains but does not deliver, the gaping hole does not bleed but affixes itself to death's frozen cut. "Deathless death" (this is what Lucretius called the paradox of death's infinitude) cannot but be apprehended as infinite replay, a recursivity that arcs into the shape of an ellipse, traces of whose bend connect the figural composition of the comics' unnamed Vietnamese mother (her breasts, her heaving belly, her rounded collar, the upward slip of her grimacing brow) to *Watchmen* (2019)'s Lady Trieu (the gleaming orb of her face, the thick half-circles of her exposed ears, the tufted coil of her khan dong, the soon-to-be ragged and frozen cavity in the center of her palm) across the grids of panel and screen.



Left: *Watchmen* (1987)'s unnamed Vietnamese woman. Right: Trieu moments before her death ("See How They Fly," 38:34).

If *Watchmen* (2019) wants to unstick history and figure the U.S. out of the recursive and self-perpetuating loop of its settler imperial violence (all the violence committed under the hollow sign of the "American") by disguising this violence under the visages of new and improved forms, Trieu is the unforgettable hook—the recursive force of the American War (but always, the American Wars, *ad reductio*)—that haunts Lindelof's "remix." For the story to work, she must be employed within the plot: cut into pieces until she fits its gridded space.

So we return (again) to the moment of her death.

Trieu dies, mounted upon a gridded matrix of metal rods (the "fingers" of the Millennium Clock, a quantum centrifuge she has built to usurp Manhattan's

nuclear powers). As she prepares to activate the centrifuge, she serenades the horrified crowd with promises of the future to come: she will “fix the world... disappear the nukes, end starvation, clean the air[: a]ll the things [Dr. Manhattan] should have done” (“See How They Fly,” 2019, 4:23). One might propose, following the intensely networked assemblage of the centrifuge, that Trieu’s occupation of a series of outwardly expanding appendages suggests a visual compendium of centralized control that renders her uncannily and prodigiously inhuman.⁴⁸ Suggesting that Trieu lives at the center of a web of manipulation, a symbolic reading of the visual logic of Trieu’s final scene would echo the admission that in fact she has been the puppet master all along, that at the base of a dense concoction of white supremacist and statist violence is the Asiatic woman, the originating source of moral and political transgression.

Yet this is not all. Beyond visual stereotypy, Trieu’s death delineates and enframes. Symbolism, here, is the handmaiden of form’s insistent materiality: surrounded by the patina of mirrors, which enfolds the metal fingers of the machine into gridded patchwork, Trieu commands and is commanded by the line; she is run through by the two poles splicing behind her head and waist, unfurling a right angle through the seams of her garment in the simulation of a cross. The implication here is that she is a delusional and self-appointed Jesus; her embodiment is a dense point of narcissism, folding back into itself like the hall of mirrors which graces her sides. Yet try as it might to assign steadfast moral significance to her, Trieu’s lineation also proposes a recalcitrant and formal unsettling of meaning: if she first appears to us as a silhouette, glowing in evening light and flanked by the heads of the astounded Clarks, in this final (framing) moment, her brilliant illumination confirms that the infinitude of the (outside and out)line is all there is.

Form de- and recomposes meaning. Here, the wily lines of the cross extend into a plus sign: the logic of recursivity is a never-ending and, a process in which the output of a system becomes its input, a feedback loop resembling an outward spiral that disorders narrative closure. Symbolically, Trieu’s elimination would suppose a gratifying finitude, but the recursivity of deathless death, settler empire’s whirring machine, winds Trieu up and sets her countdown into motion at the center of the Millennium Clock. It is a matter of the count, of who gets to count and how many Vietnamese women we can recount, and which origin points count. Another anamnestic reference, besides the unnamed Vietnamese mother: as *Watchmen* (2019) picks up the comic panel and imagines Trieu’s mother as one of the anonymous Vietnamese workers staffing Adrian Veidt’s



Trieu in her web of power (“See How They Fly,” 51:53).

Vivarium, the count begins in the uncounted and unspools into the uncountable dyad of indistinguishable mothering daughters and daughtering mothers. Trieu's formal genealogy of endless rebirths and effortful straining amplifies the negativity of the original comics' anxious abortion. The Vietnamese woman's impossible birth coincides with her impossible death: she sets off a count that continually returns to her, mother/daughter/mother. Trieu's death is but one in a recursively amplifying chain: apocalyptic time on a loop.



Left: Adrian Veidt monologues to his Vietnamese workers (Watchmen [1987]). Right: Veidt and crew film an announcement. Bian will take advantage of this momentary distraction to sneak into Veidt's office and steal his specimen. ("See How They Fly," 1:13).

If the imperial grammar of Blackness names the way U.S. imperial culture erects and then dissolves the threat of Black femininity, the settler imperial grammar of Asiatic femininity names the recursive infinitude of imperial time. Divergent from the plasticity of Blackness, the settler imperial grammar of Asiatic femininity emphasizes the brittle expanse and recalcitrant recursivity of settler empire's historicity, one fragile and prone to repetition. Brittleness and recursivity also characterize the Asiatic woman's formalization of (political, social) contradiction—not vestibular to culture, she lives, as Trieu demonstrates, both at the outer reaches of culture as an encroaching force of foreign antagonism and at its very center as empire's most authentic self-expression.⁴⁹ Flummoxing the distinction between interiority/exteriority, Trieu's brittle lines mediate the accretive force of U.S. settler imperialism across the North American continent, much of the Pacific, and continental East and Southeast Asia.

Take it one step further: the Asiatic woman does not only formally figure the contradictions of imperial expansionism from within the narrative of humanitarian uplift, but her villainy and illegibility renew the hermeneutics of suspicion as a materialist ethic (here, materialism does not attest to the ineffable but compels interpretation, an ethical act).⁵⁰ By leveraging a challenge to the self-naturalization of U.S. settler empire, the Asiatic woman's curious inhumanity compels reading: she is the irresolvable problematic, the aporia at the heart of Watchmen (2019) that forces the text of settler empire to turn toward—and unsettle—itsself. When Trieu breaks, punctured by a hundred frozen squid bullets, it is not only the body (read: the figure of the Asiatic woman) which fractures, but the line: if the recursive form of Trieu's cyclical genealogy names the way the line touches itself, then the bullet wound, sundering a circle, attempts to

bring to a formal end the insistent questioning—interpretation, remembrance, imagination—not only of the American War(s) but settler empire itself.⁵¹



The hand of Dr. Manhattan (“An Almost Religious Awe” 2019, 1:21).

This is what *Watchmen* (2019) wants us to believe, at least: that Trieu’s visual explosion can formally end the count and foreclose reading, that we could watch her pummeled as Americans watched Vietnam destroyed in the cacophony of a million theaters. In Trieu’s detonation, we could forget about the Vietnam War—could forget both the violence wrought there, and forget Vietnam itself, another synonym for the War—and remember only the omnipresent threat of Oriental Communist subterfuge and hum its everything-everywhere-all-at-once refrain as the settler imperial grammar of Asiatic femininity does its neat work of purifying white supremacy. Yet the remains of the Asiatic woman haunt us with its returns, and we are riven beyond a politics of representation into her stubborn materialism and aching forms. In and on Trieu, the settler imperial grammar of Asiatic femininity comes with a peculiar postscript, the matter of which concerns a lingering excess—an unyielding, recursive force—lodged in the way of *Watchmen* (2019)’s smooth unfurling.

MOTHERING IS A DOWNWARD ARROW

Even after Trieu dies, something remains: her forceful murder, the activity of loss, and the peculiarity of the Asiatic woman’s brittle gleam can’t be so easily willed away by *Watchmen*’s happy ending. What remains is the mother—more specifically, the anti-relational, anti-reproductive Asiatic mother.

In the singular scene in which Bian the First appears, we watch as she shuffles into Adrian Veidt’s office, undetected as a cleaning woman. She wears a purple shirt with a mandarin collar and frog buttons above a black pencil skirt. Her hair is in a bun, she dons oversized tortoiseshell glasses, and her mouth is set in a grim line. As she strains to eject the vial of Veidt’s sperm (the difficulty a suggestive sign of her own intractable surface), legs wide and back spread to Veidt’s oaken desk, Schubert’s “Ave Maria” swells in the background. With a triumphant grunt, Bian declares in Vietnamese the folkloric verse famously attributed to the historic Lady Trieu, Trieu Thi Trinh: “I want to ride the strong winds, crush the angry waves, slay the killer whales in the Eastern Sea, chase

away the Wu army, reclaim the land, remove the yoke of slavery. I will not bend my back to be a slave.”⁵²

Bian’s pose—angled legs spliced by upright back and poised syringe—figures a downward-pointing arrow. Here, the production, the labor of mothering, is inseparable from the recalcitrant recitation of loss. Bian is not so much a point of origin than the currier of a force already underway, one pointing to what is at the edge of the image, to what can’t be figured and what is not enough to be figured in the self-settled myth of U.S. settler empire.

Bian’s recitation points to competing readings of Lady Trieu, lodged in the repressed twentieth century revolutionary history of Vietnam, which *Watchmen* (2019) flattens into the impersonal sign of enmity. In *Watchmen* (2019), the disappeared history of the Vietnam revolution as well as the cultural specificities of the mythical figure Lady Trieu are recused as understandable collaterals of “adaptation,” yet it is precisely in this moment of semiological distortion that Asiatic femininity is naturalized into its artifice and productively placed before the horizon of death as an alibi of U.S. settler empire.⁵³



Bian at the scene of conception (“*See How They Fly*” 2019, 4:48).

In the revolutionary history of Vietnam, “Lady Trieu” references both the specificity of the 3rd century Vietnamese myth—the nine-foot-tall woman with heaving breasts (which she swung over her shoulders in battle) who led her army from atop an elephant to expel encroaching Chinese armies in the third century—and more generally, the mythification of a revolutionary Vietnamese femininity wedded to the anti-colonial Vietnamese national project. As a historical referent for maternity, the mythical “Trieu” metonymizes an inextricable marriage between Vietnamese femininity and Vietnamese nationalism, in which the Vietnamese woman is simultaneously mother of the nation and a vulnerable young girl representing the desecration of national sovereignty; simultaneously a nurturing caretaker and the relentless “general of the interior” (the warlord of the domestic home front); a mourning mother who has given her children to the revolution and a militant maternal driven to arms; a patriotic citizen and an immoral entrepreneur during the post-socialist (*Doi Moi*) era.⁵⁴ Both hard and soft, nurturing and militant, a revolutionary subject par excellence and the symbol of revolutionary failure, the Vietnamese woman’s flexible signification—

the demand for her simultaneous presence and disappearance—attests to the anticolonial Vietnamese state’s ventriloquism through Vietnamese femininity to legitimize its national project.

Thus the cadre Thu Van declares, in Trinh T. Minh-ha’s experimental documentary *Surname Viet Given Name Nam* (1989), that the Vietnamese woman does not exist, though the state cherishes mothers and wives: “Ghost women with no humanity! They display us in shop windows for foreign visitors who come to look at our lives.”⁵⁵ In *Watchmen* (2019), Lady Trieu’s hardened and inscrutable face invokes, in the war-weary and bewildered American cultural memory, both Vietnamese femininity’s demure and radiant smile (the graceful girl clad in a flowing ao dai) and its revolutionary sneer (the barefooted peasant woman toting machine gun and baby).

Yet if Trieu’s insistent materiality throws a wrench into the epistemic frame of imperial culture, so too does her failed motherhood—the specter of her sterile body, a brittle body—pose a critique to the Vietnamese nation state’s scrupulous management of Vietnamese femininity and the socially reproductive labors of Vietnamese women. While *Watchmen* (2019) figures both Trieu and her mother Bian as dysfunctional, treacherous women who ape patriarchal authority while trying to undermine it, it is precisely a refusal of the patriarchal authority of both settler empire and anti-imperial nation state that Trieu articulates in her cyclical referentiality to her mother. By cloning Bian—by persisting through stubborn melancholia, a refusal to forget, a clinging onto the insistent materiality of Bian’s recurrence—Trieu insists on a different lineage through Vietnamese femininity’s associations with a denied and repressed Vietnamese maternity in both the imperial and anti-colonial nationalist perspectives.

On, in, and through Lady Trieu, we spot the excesses of the settler imperial grammar of Asiatic femininity—inscrutability as a material strategy of conjuring forms of loss: memories of the War, and a repressed Vietnamese American maternity that could only be gleaned as the trope of “Vietnamese woman” within the cultural mythologies of both U.S. empire (where she is reduced to the work of terrorism or seduction) and the heteropatriarchal Vietnamese state (where she is commandeered as both revolutionary paragon and anti-revolutionary failure). Confronting Vietnamese femininity as the cultural form of an anti-imperialist hermeneutics, settler imperial culture necessitates the destruction of the Vietnamese woman for fear of the alternative readings she gathers in her insistently recursive, insistently material call.

To return to the surface of it all: Memory, of the motherland, of violence, and of the mother herself, is at stake in Bian’s recitation—and within *Watchmen* (2019) more broadly. Taking seriously for a moment Bian’s winking, self-declaration as a “Pachyderm mom,” we note that the textured skin of the pachyderm (an obsolete order of mammals that includes the rhinoceros and elephant) might be a complement to the imperviousness of Trieu’s sleek, bug armor. Where Trieu’s slick and inscrutable surface moves us toward and through the aporia of an in/visible Vietnamese femininity in both the U.S. imperial and Vietnamese national imaginaries, Bian’s self-invoked pachydermal exterior—coarse, impla-

cable, liable to tracking dirt, archiving age on its skin—visualizes the materiality of memory.⁵⁶ The struggle between these two textures—a smooth imperviousness and an accretive graininess (might we also recall the elephant’s famously long memory?)—is the struggle between discarding and remembering the American War in Vietnam, at the core of *Watchmen* (2019)’s cultural exercise.



Detoxifying from a drug overdose in Trieu’s lab, Angela Abar discovers she is hooked to an elephant; her grandfather’s synthetic memories are being cleared from her body and placed into the pachyderm host (“An Almost Religious Awe” 2019, 39:26).

Another example of memory’s intimate exteriorization is offered by the anthropologist Thuy Linh Nguyen Tu, whose account of contemporary Vietnamese women’s “experiments in skin” understands these women’s aspirations for “hard” and gleaming skin as a means of negotiating the toxic intimacies of the Vietnam War.⁵⁷ Tu reads in contemporary Vietnamese women’s desire for a flawless and hardened surface a desire to reckon with the alternative “repositor[ies] of violence” held on the skin—repositories which point both to the chemical trails left by dioxin (presenting, frequently, as epidermal inflammation) and the racial ontology of Asiatic “hardness” produced by the U.S. military’s dermatological research during the Vietnam War.⁵⁸ In the myth of insistently hard and brittle Vietnamese skin that justified empire’s unprecedented and ceaseless violence we find a final conceptual rhyme to Lady Trieu’s own intractable materiality, her bug-like body, whose smooth and gleaming surface seemingly defends itself against both the chemical and semiotic warfare of settler empire, aiming to penetrate and commandeer her as its mythic alibi.⁵⁹

Even as Trieu’s intractable surface indexes her destructible inscrutability, such inscrutability, lodged shell-deep, also pulls at the memory of War—the repositories of statist violence and the reproductive labor they repress or otherwise render illegible in *Watchmen* (2019)’s historical narration. Yet rather than being taxidermized by imperial violence that seeks to render it transparent, Trieu’s skin, its brittle weight and glossy surface, breaks open the self-enclosed circuit of settler imperial myth instead, conjuring the downward-pointing arrow of the Vietnamese mother—the reader and writer of secrets, maker of worlds and the one who could unseam them, too—who bodies forth a recursive lineage that hits the edge of the image and rebounds, fracturing the frozen time of myth.

Though the show would have us invest in the seemingly enclosed circularity of Trieu and Bian as evidence of an essentialized Oriental despotism, I move, finally, to suggest that their relationship emblemizes the reproductive labor of (re-)reading, and so remains unbounded and anti-essentialist. Trieu refuses to move on, refuses to forget either her mother or the memories of the War which Bian carries. Even as *Watchmen* (2019) pivots on themes of remembrance and memorialization, remarking pointedly on the illicit encounters of chattel slavery and dispossession that engender the political power of U.S. empire; even as *Watchmen* (2019) utilizes Angela Abar to memorialize the long afterlife of enslavement, the show cannot but render the American War in Vietnam as an archive of settler imperial violence entrapped upon the inscrutable surface of the Vietnamese mother—either Bian’s coarse surface or Trieu’s gleaming, brittle one. By appealing to the materiality of the Asiatic woman, the settler imperial grammar of Asiatic femininity punctuates the illegibility of matter with the compulsions of interpretation. The symptom of interpretation constitutes what this essay wagers is the creative reproduction of maternal memory, one that persists as hermeneutics through the replicatory rotation of Asiatic women in a foreclosed descent. The mother’s return, encapsulated by Bian’s replication, is also an epigenetic twist of the text that materializes the living past of the War, the slow burn of a Vietnam on fire. The moebius strip of mother and daughter insists not on linear descent but survival through re-interpretation. Their regeneration, their ongoing relationship, attest to the recursive force of mothering: a hermeneutic labor through war’s long present. Apprehensible as an aesthetic reproduction that insists on repetition, return, and the rereading of memory’s materiality, the unbounded circularity of Trieu and Bian survives the sunken afterlife of settler imperial war and throws a wrench into empire’s fantasies of autochthonous recuperation and renewal. Finally, *Watchmen* (2019)’s play with recursion and metonymy, rather than simply collapsing (U.S.) settler empire with (Vietnamese) anti-imperial nation, reveals an imperial culture unable to escape from itself—in other words, unable to remain innocent of reading and thus condemned to the trace of the mother.

The last word gets to be that of the Vietnamese mother. Where we began with the wail of the unnamed woman in the original *Watchmen* comics, let us return, by conclusion, to Bian’s triumphant cry at the scene of conception, which inaugurates the world to come by commemorating the traces of a revolution-ary past. What would it mean to think the labor of Vietnamese mothering in the terms of such a cry, which activates occluded pasts in the present—tapping into speculative futures that move through the Vietnamese woman’s flickering image? Bian’s cry insists on the memorialization of situated and multiplicitous perspectives—what Trinh T. Minh-ha calls the ethical polyvocality of the woman of color writer, her endless “to-and-fro movement between the writing woman and the written woman.”⁶⁰ Not just written, but a self-effacing authorship pointing back and again, toward the productive hermeneutics of reading and writing: in, with, and through Trieu and Bian’s relentless movement, the labor of Vietnamese mothering endeavors in the collaborative work of making another world.

REFERENCES

1. Acknowledgements: I thank the three anonymous reviewers for their insightful comments. Additionally, I am grateful to Lan P. Duong, Michelle N. Huang, Viet Thanh Nguyen, Rachel Axler, Sara Richland, Joaquin Lopez, Jackie Wang, Kara Keeling, Kimia Shahi, Sean Fraga, Issay Matsumoto, and Jiyeon Park for their invaluable feedback and support. All mistakes are my own.
2. In the original comics, Dr. Manhattan is the alias of Jon Osterman, a Jewish refugee- turned-laboratory assistant whose survival in a nuclear generator and subsequent rebirth as a superhero personifies the technological leap and political authority achieved by the U.S. through its invention of the atomic bomb. Against a troubled conscience, the all-powerful Manhattan puts himself to the service of his country, secures the American victory in Vietnam, and consecrates a postwar peace led by a benevolent, prosperous, and technologically-advanced U.S. state.
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4. Nicole Simek, "Speculative Futures: Race in Watchmen's Worlds," *Symploke* 28, no. 1-2 (2020): 385, <https://doi.org/10.5250/symploke.28.1-2.0385>; Emily O'Malley and Paul D. Reich, "'The Future Thanks You for Your Service': HBO's Watchmen as Instructive Discourse," *Popular Culture Review* 33, no. 1 (June 2022): 59-102, <https://doi.org/10.18278/pcr.33.1.4>; Diana Adesola Mafe, "Sister Night, Hooded Justice, and Racial Reckoning in Watchmen," *JCMS: Journal of Cinema and Media Studies* 63, no. 5 (2023): 243-62, <https://doi.org/10.1353/cj.2023.a933156>; Jonathan W. Gray, "Watchmen after the End of History: Race, Redemption, and the End of the World / Jonathan W. Gray," *ASAP/Review*, February 3, 2020, <https://asapjournal.com/feature/watchmen-after-the-end-of-history-race-redemption-and-the-end-of-the-world-jonathan-w-gray/>.
5. Viet Thanh Nguyen, "How 'Watchmen's' Misunderstanding of Vietnam Undercuts Its Vision of Racism - Viet Thanh Nguyen," accessed August 24, 2024, <https://vietnguyen.info/2019/how-watchmens-misunderstanding-of-vietnam-undercuts-its-vision-of-racism>.
6. Elaine Castillo, *How to Read Now: Essays* (Penguin, 2022).
7. Entanglements between varied modes of racial violence have been fruitfully elucidated by critical studies of U.S. empire in both *American Studies* and *Asian American Studies*. See Nikhil Pal Singh, *Race and America's Long War*; Moon-Ho Jung, *Menace to Empire*; Simeon Man, *Soldiering Through Empire*; Jodi Kim, *Ends of Empire*; Iyko Day, *Alien Capital*.
9. Even within a story arc beset by visual pyrotechnics and a broader diegetic universe characterized by thrilling action sequences, Lady Trieu's death is notable for its textured rendering. While the deaths of other villains within the show are shown off-screen, we linger on Trieu's brutalized body. Such a lingering suggests the momentary emergence of a base materialism prior to the congealment of the symbol within a system of signification abstracted from materiality. This essay takes up the base—the mattering—which recursively disturbs the enclosure of signification. Deleuze describes the continual disturbance of signification by the force of materiality as the work

of the Figure. Writing on the paintings of Francis Bacon, Deleuze distinguishes between a form which attends to sensation and one that attends to representation: “the form related to the sensation (the Figure) is the opposite of the form related to an object that it is supposed to represent (figuration)” (32). Following Deleuze and Bacon, the insistent materiality of Trieu’s Figure suggests a mode of reading beyond the representational: the punctured holes of the Asiatic woman’s body articulates an anorganic vitalism in which the body seeks to escape itself. Rather than as a symbol within a representational system, Trieu is a Figure who carries the sensation of force beyond the organism, that is, her Figure brings forth the materiality disavowed by the symbol. See Gilles Deleuze, *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation* (A&C Black, 2003).

10. In their well-known anthology of new materialisms, Samantha Frost and Diana Coole characterize new materialisms as a philosophical project bound to the affirmation of “matter’s immanent vitality” (8). New materialisms stake their opposition to foundational assumptions in Western philosophy between the establishment of human agency against a world of nonagentic and static matter. A precognitive, “phenomenological approach to embodiment” factors as an important element of this endeavor by attuning the human subject to the “corporeal capacities” of its body and its entanglement with the material world (20). For more on the activity of matter, see Diana Coole and Samantha Frost, *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics* (Duke University Press, 2010); Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Duke University Press, 2007).
11. I conjure Eugenie Brinkema’s vitalizing affirmation of form: “The speculative potential of form inserts negation into...‘the affordances of form,’ opening up the question of the disaffordances of form, its capacity to neutralize, suspend, disrupt, even void grounds of meaning, render readings that are bad investments, interpretive stances that do not turn thinking toward substantives but attest to non-understanding, finitude, passage, the non-something, abeyance, inaudibility, all without obliterating those scenes by recalling them to languages of presence, humanism, idealism, plenitude, and so on” (262). For Brinkema, form stages the contours of an aesthetics after precognition and perception, disembarking the perils of the self-evident in favor of a radical formalism in which affect resides not in the subject but the modulations of form, whose pursuits opens “the creativity generated by affirming the undoing of presence” (45). Here, I mark aesthetic theorizations of race as a fertile site upon
12. which radical formalism and new materialisms join in conversation. Rather than designating race as solely as embodied sensation, a formalist treatment of race might move us beyond both the “body” and immediatized perceptions of the racialized subject to what Michelle N. Huang has called the posthumanist heuristics of race, which challenges the “constant rearticulation of the human” (131). See Michelle N. Huang, “Creative Evolution,” *Amerasia Journal* 42, no. 2 (2016): 118-138; Eugenie Brinkema, *The Forms of the Affects* (Duke University Press, 2014).
13. Erica R. Edwards, *The Other Side of Terror: Black Women and the Culture of U.S. Empire* (NYU Press, 2021).
14. The laboratory’s emulation of the Southeast Asian jungle references the lush, mobile ecosystem of Adrian Veidt’s futuristic laboratory, called the “Vivarium.” In the original comics, the Vivarium captured the ecosystem of

Vietnamese forests and was staffed by Vietnamese refugees-turned-laboratory assistants, among them, Watchmen (2019) retroactively details, Trieu's mother, Bian. Despite being a pointed recreation of her father's Vivarium, however, Trieu credits the laboratory to her mother, wresting back from Veidt the colonial object of Vietnam: "On her deathbed, my mother made me promise to never leave Vietnam, so I brought Vietnam here!" See *An Almost Religious Awe*, Action, Drama, Mystery (DC Comics, DC Entertainment, Paramount Television, 2019).

15. Settler empire is defined as the interrelated structures of U.S. continental settler colonialism and militarized imperialism, and the contradictory ways in which imperialism and diasporic colonial complicity function to justify continued settler stewardship of North America and occlude the entangled economies of settlement and empire. By calling the United States a settler empire, I draw attention to the necessary co-articulation of U.S. imperialism and settler colonialism. Within Asian American Studies, key work on settler imperialism has been done by scholars of U.S. empire and Asian settler colonialism. See Iyko Day, *Alien Capital: Asian Racialization and the Logic of Settler Colonial Capitalism* (Duke University Press, 2016); Juliana Hu Pegues, *Space-Time Colonialism: Alaska's Indigenous and Asian Entanglements* (UNC Press Books, 2021); Jonathan Y. Okamura and Candace Fujikane, *Asian Settler Colonialism: From Local Governance to the Habits of Everyday Life in Hawaii* (University of Hawaii Press, 2008); Dean Itsuji Saranillio, *Unsustainable Empire: Alternative Histories of Hawai'i Statehood* (Duke University Press, 2018) for studies related to settler imperialism. On the genealogy of the U.S.'s transpacific settler imperialism, see Richard Drinnon, *Facing West: The Metaphysics of Indian-Hating and Empire-Building* (University of Oklahoma Press, 1997); Richard Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America* (University of Oklahoma Press, 1998); as well as Jodi Kim, *Settler Garrison: Debt Imperialism, Militarism, and Transpacific Imaginaries* (Duke University Press, 2022).
16. Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death* (Harvard University Press, 1985), 7.
17. Edwards writes in *The Other Side of Terror* that U.S. state power must anxiously revisit and resolve the illegitimate encounters (of enslavement and dispossession) of its genesis: "I use the term imperial grammars of Blackness to refer to the codes of cultural production and public discourse linking the rationalization of US imperial violence abroad to the US public sphere's manipulation and incorporation of Black-ness as the sign of multicultural beneficence. It has been through the verbal and visual language of Black achievement, Black suffering, and Black resistance that the United States has justified invasion, occupation, perpetual detainment, and other military-carceral modalities of counterterrorism" (22). See Erica R. Edwards, *The Other Side of Terror: Black Women and the Culture of US Empire* (NYU Press, 2021).
18. Abar's potential threat to U.S. security—her disobedience of the police chief, her thwarting of the FBI special agent, her racially-promiscuous mothering of three white children (whom she adopted after their parents were murdered)—is not only nullified but justified as a healthy distrust of the system. The scales fall from our eyes as the police chief turns out to be a white supremacist and the FBI agent a narc, while Abar rises as the rightful architect and moral guarantor of U.S. state power.

19. The history of Abar's family—from her great-grandparents' demise in the Tulsa Massacre to her parents' demise in US-occupied South Vietnam—culminates in *Watchmen* (2019)'s widely celebrated sixth episode, "This Extraordinary Being," which animates the historical life of Abar's grandfather, the superhero Hooded Justice, who survives the Jim Crow South and lives as a closeted gay man and one of the NYPD's first Black policemen in the 1940s. For a fuller elaboration of the historical reckoning offered by this storyline, see Diana Adesola Mafe, "Sister Night, Hooded Justice, and Racial Reckoning in *Watchmen*." *JCMS: Journal of Cinema and Media Studies* 63, no. 5 (2023): 243-62.
20. In the high style of this scene, Christ-like veneration enshrines Black femininity's imperial grammar: the Black mother consecrates a post-apocalyptic return to political innocence, recalling what Donna Haraway famously diagnosed as masculinist, imperial dreams of a prophetic end to "salvation history." See Donna Jeanne Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century," in *The Transgender Studies Reader* (Routledge, 2013), 103-18.
21. Marguerite Nguyen, *America's Vietnam: The Longue Durée of U.S. Literature and Empire* (Temple University Press, 2018). Interestingly, as we alluded in the opening of the essay, Trieu is rendered visually "fully" Asian despite her theoretically half-white parentage (portrayed by Vietnamese American actress Hong Chau), the phenotypical mark of Adrian Veidt's genetic inheritance apparently lost on her. In this sense, a eugenicist principle of biological heredity also literally fails to grip onto her face. The fact of Trieu's foreignness might be read a little more literally as a matter of racial exile, reflected in a biological and social whiteness (visually) eschewed. At the same time, she is mired in an expressively and excessively Oriental raciality: the culturalism of her Asian heritage is exaggerated through what a supplementary article to the show calls the "loony" parenting strategies of Trieu's mother, Bian, who proudly dubs herself a "pachyderm mom" in a play on the more-familiar "tiger mom." Emblematic of an unassimilable, exilic Asiatic difference, Trieu and her mother Bian avail themselves of an essentialized representation of Oriental despotism, binding the tropes of the tiger mother, the inscrutable Asian American, and the tragic métis into the nefarious figure of the Asiatic dictator, arch-enemy to the moral benevolence of U.S. democracy.
22. Jodi Kim argues in *Ends of Empire* that the Cold War's epistemic frameworks—informing Asian racialization and liberal democratic considerations of "freedom" within entangled logics of race and empire—continue to shape both Asian Americanist critique and contemporary U.S. policy. The epistemic frameworks of the "old" Cold War may be seen to continue in contemporary debates around the "New Cold War," waged in political science and public scholarship, on the fate and future of U.S. empire. While there remains disagreement around the contours of the New Cold War's distinction from the "old" Cold War (specifically regarding the role of China in the post-Nixonian development of global capitalism), the general consensus is that the 21st century is witnessing a renewed era of geopolitical and economic antagonism between the United States and its enemies, the PRC, Russia, and Iran. It is in the context of this undeniable antagonism that the Asiatic racial form of Lady Trieu signals *Watchmen* (2019)'s crucial, if unconscious, concern with the moral calculus of the U.S. imperial state. See, in addition Jodi Kim, *Ends of Empire: Asian American Critique and the Cold*

- War (University of Minnesota Press, 2004), John Gaddis, *The Cold War: A New History* (Penguin, 2006), and Vijay Prashad et al., *Washington's New Cold War: A Socialist Perspective* (NYU Press, 2022).
23. Colleen Lye, *America's Asia: Racial Form and American Literature, 1893-1945* (Princeton University Press, 2009).
 24. I borrow the term "horizon of death" from Paula Chakravartty and Denise Silva, "Accumulation, Dispossession, and Debt: The Racial Logic of Global Capitalism—An Introduction," *American Quarterly* 64, no. 3 (September 2012): 361-85, <https://doi.org/10.1353/aq.2012.0033>. There, they describe the ontological deficiency of the Black and Indigenous subjects under the purview of Western philosophy (in particular, German Idealism).
 25. Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons, *Watchmen* (DC Comics, [1986] 2019), 56. This scene is repeated, with grisly detail, in the 2009 film adaptation of *Watchmen*. See *Watchmen*, Action, Drama, Mystery (Warner Bros., Paramount Pictures, Legendary Entertainment, 2009).
 26. Following Natalia Duong and Keva X. Bui, here, the elevation of Abar into the auspices of superhumanity articulates a "repair...sutured to healing the wounds of the nation-state in foreclosing the traumatic past of war and violence"—not just the violence of chattel slavery, but also of the U.S. imperial war on Vietnam (Bui 307). See Natalia Duong, "Agent Orange Bodies: Việt, Đức, and Transnational Narratives of Repair," *Canadian Review of American Studies* 48, no. 3 (June 2018): 387-414, ; Keva X. Bui, "Objects of Warfare: Infrastructures of Race and Napalm in the Vietnam War," *Amerasia Journal* 47, no. 2 (January 17, 2021): 299-313, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00447471.2021.2021775>.
 27. The responsibility is deadly, as the show acknowledges in its fantasy of Abar's martyrdom. Her extraordinary capacity is predicated on what Jackson calls the "ontologized plasticity" (11) of black(ened) peoples, hinged in particular upon the "plasticity of un/gendered black(female)ness [which] permits objects to converge and/or be substituted across received orders of animacy and species" (166). By becoming the medium of U.S. empire's transmission, a carriage made possible by the ontologized plasticity of slavery, Abar bears an unbearable weight, her salvational arc (the grace of the mother) inseparable from the same universalizing logic that, as Jackson writes, "ritualistically posits black(female)ness as opacity, inversion, and limit" (10). Yet for all other intents and purposes, the Black maternal appears, in the image proffered by *Watchmen* (2019), as triumphant. This appearance of triumph, I am wagering, renders Black femininity's grammatical plasticity unthinkable except through recourse to an analysis of Abar's function. See Zakkiyah Iman Jackson, *Becoming Human: Matter and Meaning in an Antiracist World* (New York University Press, 2020) and Joy James, *The Captive Maternal: Anti-Fascists in Search of the Beloved* (Pluto Press, 2026).
 28. Lady Trieu is the troubled "Asian American" villain because she is not, properly speaking, American, but hails from the colonized territory of South Vietnam. The very name of Lady Trieu conjures the problem of Indigeneity, summons *Watchmen* (2019)'s inability to contend with the historical vectors of settler colonization. In the speculative universe, South Vietnam is annexed, turned into the 51st state of the United States—by the play of a violent metaphor, a Hawai'i after Hawai'i, rendering the Vietnamese Indigenous rather than exogenous migrants. We must note that this very allusion to Indigeneity—an allusion completed by way of a critical elision of

Indigeneity in North America and the Pacific—itself constitutes an extension of the settler imperial logic whereby the mythification of Asian diasporic populations (in this case, the rendering of the Vietnamese diaspora as Indigenous within the show’s counterfactual U.S. settler empire) justifies a second disappearing—the rendering unthinkable—of Indigeneity in North America and the Pacific. Neither continental imperialism (the settler colonization of North America) nor transpacific settler empire can appear as other than an insinuation or stray detail excluded from the narrative redemption tour of the show. By drawing attention to the structural occupation of Indigeneity rendered by what *Watchmen* (2019) calls the “Asiatic Americas” (the presumably expanding zone of U.S. settlement in Asia), then, the settler imperial grammar of Asiatic femininity names the formal contradiction of the U.S. imperial project: the never-naturalized and always-alienating Asiatic exterior which the American frontier attempts to interpellate into its fold. The undying, extending line of the frontier fails to conscript; rather, it crosses the Asiatic woman perpendicularly, redacting her.

29. For a definition of settler empire, see note 8. In a striking example of the continuities between settler colonialism and empire during the Cold War, we might remember that U.S. soldiers famously referred to Vietnam as “Indian Country.” See Richard Drinnon, *Facing West: The Metaphysics of Indian-Hating and Empire-Building* (University of Oklahoma Press, 1997).
30. Erica R. Edwards, *The Other Side of Terror: Black Women and the Culture of US Empire* (NYU Press, 2021), 19.
31. Edwards notes: “That U.S. governments, corporations, supper clubs, and schools might turn the authority that inheres in Blackness’s creative endurance to their gain is nothing new. Since the first slave raid, Blackness has been the site of a permanent state of emergency, and white society has profited from its performance and consumption of cultural forms that bear witness to the Black’s capacity to survive the end of the world. To be Black is to live on the jagged edge between terror and vitality” (ibid, 19). Blackness’ “creative endurance” is its suppleness, its productivity, a power that inheres, as Zakiyyah Iman Jackson notes, in the plasticity of Black matter. Iman Jackson, *Becoming Human: Matter and Meaning in an Antiracist World* (New York University Press, 2020) and Hortense J. Spillers, *Black, White, and in Color: Essays on American Literature and Culture* (University of Chicago Press, 2003).
32. In this regard, the settler imperial grammar of Asiatic femininity confronts the 20th century U.S. wars in Asia as a problem to *Watchmen* (2019)’s settled historical narrative. By referencing the creative violence of U.S. warfare (a productive force that continually escapes the many political classifications granted the United States—colony, nation, empire), Lady Trieu unsettles Angela Abar’s heroic position, and her heroic positioning of the U.S. as a redeemed, humanitarian regime. Lady Trieu is the troubled “Asian American” villain because she is not, properly speaking, American, but hails from the colonized territory of South Vietnam. The very name of Lady Trieu conjures the problem of Indigeneity, summons the modulations of settler colonization repressed by *Watchmen* (2019). In the speculative universe, South Vietnam is annexed, turned into the 51st state of the United States—by the play of a violent metaphor, a Hawai’i after Hawai’i, rendering the Vietnamese Indigenous rather than exogenous migrants. Neither continental imperialism (the settler colonization of North America) nor transpacific

settler empire can appear as other than an insinuation or stray detail excluded from the narrative redemption tour of the show. By drawing attention to the structural occupation of Indigeneity rendered by what *Watchmen* (2019) calls the “Asiatic Americas” (the presumably expanding zone of U.S. settlement in Asia), then, the settler imperial grammar of Asiatic femininity names the formal contradiction of the U.S. imperial project: the never-naturalized and always-alienating Asiatic exterior which the American frontier attempts to interpellated into its fold. The undying, extending line of the frontier fails to conscript; rather, it crosses the Asiatic woman perpendicularly, redacting her.

33. Damon Lindelof and Christal Henry, “If You Don’t Like My Story, Write Your Own,” unpublished script, 3. I thank Rachel Axler, Sara Richland, and Joaquin Lopez for their help in gaining me access to several episode scripts of *Watchmen* (2019). Thanks to Damon Lindelof for permission to release the scripts to me. Lindelof and Henry, “If You Don’t Like My Story,” 6.
34. Esther Zuckerman, “The Costume Designer for ‘Watchmen’ Unveils the Secret of Lady Trieu’s Look,” *Thrillist* (blog), November 11, 2019, <https://www.thrillist.com/entertainment/nation/hbo-watchmen-costume-design-lady-trieu>.
35. Matthew H. Bernstein and Gaylyn Studlar, eds., “Praying Mantis: Enchantment and Violence in French Cinema of the Exotic,” in *Visions of the East: Orientalism in Film* (Rutgers University Press, 1997).
36. Anne Anlin Cheng, *Ornamentalism* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2019).
37. Taking up the brilliant insights of Cheng’s analysis, we might nonetheless suggest that ornamentalism, by deploying the “ancient and enduring” myth of Asiatic femininity’s artifice as a “conduit of racial meaning [that] allow[s] the human to escape human-ness,” ultimately reifies the essential “commodity, artifice, and objectness” of Asiatic femininity as a usefully defiled instrument undermining the organic terms of racial life (Cheng 2018, 416, 425). See Anne Anlin Cheng, “Ornamentalism: A Feminist Theory for the Yellow Woman,” *Critical Inquiry* 44, no. 3 (Spring 2018): 415-46, <https://doi.org/10.1086/696921>. It is important to note that Cheng’s intervention is counter-
38. posed against Black feminisms’ elaborations of flesh. By taking as her starting point the inorganic matter of Asiatic femininity, Cheng asks after accompanying modes of racial life that supplement and challenge the predominant framing of matter by Black feminist aesthetics. For a critique of Cheng that works by re-evaluating the catachresis of Blackness, see Rizvana Bradley, *Anteaesthetics: Black Aesthetics and the Critique of Form* (Stanford University Press, 2023).
39. Cheng declares her putative commitment to the material early on: “We thus cannot talk about yellow female flesh without also engaging a history of material-aesthetic productions. The yellow woman’s history is entwined with the production and fates of silk, ceramics, celluloid, machinery, and other forms of animated objectness” (xii). Yet it remains curious that these forms of “animated objectness” cannot but service extant fantasies of Asiatic femininity as the racialized and gendered figuration of the alien within—ornamentalism’s elucidation of the “inhumanness of the human” (98). By activating the thingliness of Asiatic femininity, I draw not only on Bill Brown’s robust body of work on “Thing Theory,” but the many productive ways in which it has been taken up by Asian American and Black aesthetics,

- including Joseph Jeon's masterful study of Asian Americanist avant garde aesthetics deployment of "thingliness" as a means of denaturalizing racial inscription, and Candice Lin's critical ethnographies of matter such as porcelain and opium, which likewise activate the intimacies between the substances' colonial histories of circulation and the racial meanings produced in their wake. See also Bill Brown, "Thing Theory" and "How to Do Things with Things (A Toy Story)"; Joseph Jeon, *Racial Things, Racial Forms*; Candice Lin and Riley Snorton, "In Dialogue" in Lotte and Umolu, *Candice Lin: A Hard White Body*.
40. As Michelle N. Huang notes in "The Posthuman Subject in/of Asian American Literature," racial "identities are not freely evolving, but produced, programmed, and selected," yet "new ways of being human" are possible by appealing to the "malleability of [race's] materiality" (Huang 2019, 11, 12); this possibility of resignification corresponds with a point made by Barthes, for whom the operations of erasure and reinscription within myth are never secure. See Michelle N. Huang, "The Posthuman Subject in/of Asian American Literature," in *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Literature*, 2019, <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190201098.013.921>; Michelle N. Huang, "Ecologies of Entanglement in the Great Pacific Garbage Patch," *Journal of Asian American Studies* 20, no. 1 (2017): 95-117, <https://doi.org/10.1353/jaas.2017.0006>; Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (Macmillan, 1972).
 41. Rather than an ontology of Asiatic femininity, Trieu raises the problematic materiality of absence. Here, materiality is apprehended as the limit of substance, an ontologically-indeterminable gap, the oscillation between present absence and an absent presence.
 42. Oxford English Dictionary, "gleam (n.)," September 2024, <https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/6608060571>; Oxford English Dictionary, "shine (v.)," December 2024, <https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/4340952607>.
 43. Anne Cheng, *Ornamentalism*, xii. "[C]uteness, I argue, aestheticizes anti-Asian bias. On behalf of those of us who trace our families back to Sanrio, I ask, how is the pleasure of cute things racialized and to what effect?" (Bow 34). Leslie Bow,
 44. "Racist Cute: Caricature, Kawaii-Style, and the Asian Thing," *American Quarterly* 71, no. 1 (2019): 29-58.
 45. I agree with Asian Americanist critiques of violence—such as that of Keva X. Bui— which conclude that the visual disclosure of the injured body spectacularizes and aestheticizes it as a racialized object of rescue. However, given the insistent and visual disclosure of Lady Trieu's spectacular and brutal death, it seems to me that we must find strategies to confront the visual excess of the brutalized body, without resigning it the signification of an abstracted violence easily slid under the rug of humanitarian care. By attending to the insistent mattering of the Vietnamese American woman's body, I ask after the affordances of memory and knowledge that her materiality and surface offer, in spite and in excess of the already-excessive and aestheticized violence done to her. See Keva Bui, "Objects of Warfare: Infrastructures of Race and Napalm in the Vietnam War," 312 n40; see also Viet Thanh Nguyen, *Nothing Ever Dies: Vietnam and the Memory of War* (Harvard University Press, 2016).
 46. Oxford English Dictionary, s.v. "silhouette (n.), Etymology," July 2023, <https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/2726284555>. Ibid.

47. Lucretius' theory of the atomic swerve was originally designated in *De Reum Natura* to explain both the creation of compound bodies and the possibility of free will; bookmarking the necessity of contingency to any project of becoming, the swerve names atoms' slight deviation from straight lines as they fall through the void. In Althusser's last, unfinished essay, "The Philosophy of the Encounter," the swerve (*clinamen*) becomes the starting point to what he calls an aleatory materialism, which designates as a first cause contingency, rather than cause or reason, as the basis of the world, a serious disturbance to the viability of historical materialism. Here, we might say: the antihumanist force of form is a line that swerves; its contingency resists scripting and insists on the instability of all narrative structures. See Lucretius, *On the Nature of Things*, trans. Martin Ferguson Smith (Hackett Publishing, 2001).
48. "Mothers / daughters of their daughters" is from Guillaume Apollinaire's poem "Au- tum Crocuses," which Claude Lévi-Strauss ([1976] 1992) reads for the performance of a self-enclosed circularity between the signifier and the signified. For Catherine Malabou (2019, 38), replication does not foreclose difference but engenders a novel conception of difference "between code and message" that remains possible through cloning. This difference is made manifest by epigenesis—an a posteriori interpretation of the code that works on the "surface (*epi-*) of the molecule" and of the text (162). Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The View from Afar* (University of Chicago Press, 1992); Catherine Malabou, *Plasticity: The Promise of Explosion* (Edinburgh University Press, 2022).
49. As historians John Tchen and Dylan Yeats write (2014, 4), the Oriental's networked configurations (most fabulously coordinated in/as the octopus) have historically served as "icon[s] of top-down authoritarian power" within 20th century American Orientalism. John Kuo Wei Tchen and Dylan Yeats, *Yellow Peril!: An Archive of Anti- Asian Fear* (Verso, 2014).
50. Zakiyyah Iman Jackson, *Becoming Human: Matter and Meaning in an Antiblack World* (NYU Press, 2020).
51. Ricoeur's well-known concept of the hermeneutics of suspicion, generally allied with symptomatic reading, has been understood to pivot on a metaphor of depth in its understanding of interpretation as the recovery of latent forces which shape the apparent and the self-evident (the 'surface' of a text). The charge of depth is what allows proponents of "surface reading" to name and discard Ricoeur; see Rooney's excellent recap of this debate in "Live Free or Describe." Following what Rooney describes, in the spirit of Althusser, as the false binary between metaphors of depth and surface (both affirm the problem of 'reading at first sight'), I join the hermeneutics of suspicion to the (ontologically indeterminable) materialist surface of the text as a way of emphasizing that Ricoeur's insistence on interpretation is not bound to the metaphor of depth; rather, what calls forth the project of hermeneutics (suspicious or otherwise) including new materialisms, is the compulsive return and self-reflexive motion of re-reading and re-interpretation. Ellen Rooney, "Live Free or Describe: The Reading Effect and the Persistence of Form," *Differences* 21, no. 3 (December 1, 2010): 112-39, <https://doi.org/10.1215/10407391-2010-012>.
52. The reflexive movement of recursivity—the way the line touches itself—echoes both what Althusser understood as the hermeneutics of reading (which does not confirm a "constitutive [reading] subject" so much as enable a reflexivity of the text itself) and what Deleuze called the force of auto-

- affection, or the logics of the fold, conjuring “an inside-space that will be complete co-present with the outside-space on the line of the fold” (Deleuze, Foucault 118; qtd. in Brinkema, 23). Trieu’s cyclical genealogy proposes a method, an auto-affective and anti-subjectivist mode, of reading.
53. See *How They Fly*, (DC Comics, DC Entertainment, Paramount Television, 2019), 4:05. The tale of Lady Trieu has been widely documented by historians of Vietnam. One instance of the verse in its late-18th century guise appears in David Marr, *Vietnamese Tradition on Trial, 1920-1945* (University of California Press, 1981), 198-9.
 54. Our choice to pursue a historical reading of Lady Trieu is aimed at undermining settler imperial myth, which would produce the Asiatic woman as a hollow sign whose destruction facilitates settler empire’s own revisionist historical worlding, its attempt to neatly formalize away the traces of violence. I follow here Barthes’ schematic of the myth, in which a first order signifier is drained of meaning so that it may be commandeered by a competing historical worlding operating in the guise of a self-naturalizing myth. Crucial to that operation is the disappearance of the original historical context of the signifier, which we excavate here. See Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*.
 55. See Lan P. Duong, *Treacherous Subjects: Gender, Culture, and Trans-Vietnamese Feminism* (Temple University Press, 2012). See also William S. Turley, “Women in the Communist Revolution in Vietnam,” *Asian Survey* 12, no. 9 (1972), 794; Hue-Tam Ho Tai, ed., *The Country of Memory: Remaking the Past in Late Socialist Vietnam* (University of California Press, 2001); Christine Pelzer White, “Vietnam: War, Socialism, and the Politics of Gender Relations,” in Kruks, Rapp, and Young, eds., *Promissory Notes* (Monthly Review Press, 1989), 181. Surname Viet Given Name Nam, 1989, 29:31.
 56. I thank Michelle N. Huang for guiding me to this evocative reference to the elephant.
 57. Tu describes as Vietnamese women’s quest to concoct clear and radiant skin as a “stronger surface” defending against the genetic and physiognomic disruption of dioxin (Agent Orange) exposure. Here, skin is appealed to as a barrier against threat, both figurative and literal—the actual chemical toxins and the semiotic traces of irreparable violence which they import. See Thuy Linh Nguyen Tu, *Experiments in Skin: Race and Beauty in the Shadows of Vietnam* (Duke University Press, 2021).
 58. U.S. military dermatological research, led by Albert Kligman and conducted on incarcerated individuals at the Holmesburg Prison, proclaimed Vietnamese skin to be invulnerable, an indestructible carapace that rationalized empire’s unprecedented aerial attacks and omniscient destruction of continental Southeast Asia. For a reading of the comparative racial ontologies spawned by these experiments see also Cristina Mejia Visperas, *Skin Theory: Visual Culture and the Postwar Prison Laboratory* (NYU Press, 2022).
 59. Trieu’s materialist refusal rhymes with what Tu (2021) describes as Vietnamese women’s appeal to a hard and radiant skin, a strategy designed to manage the War’s toxic intimacies and its repositories of violence. Lady Trieu’s hardened gleam, the insistent materialism of her skin, animates what Tu describes as skin’s material encounter and its open-ended habitation with the lives that violence takes. For, contrary to the intractable skin which the U.S. military hoped it might develop as a perfect system of defense, the “strengthened” skin that Vietnamese women and cosmeticians made for

themselves sought to negotiate with the affective valences of War—its histories that live skin-deep, as scales and rashes and burns that the women diagnose as only partially legible to a biomedical regime. Correspondingly, attempts to “fix” the skin are underscored by an understanding that to “fix (sfia)” was not the same as to “put right (sfia lỗi i)” (45). Repair is impossible, but hermeneutics remain. See Thuy Linh Nguyen Tu, *Experiments in Skin: Race and Beauty in the Shadows of Vietnam* (Duke University Press, 2021).

60. T. Minh-Ha Trinh, *Woman, Native, Other: Writing Postcoloniality and Feminism* (Indiana University Press, 1989), 30.