

Branded Existence: The Oriental Woman's Self-Conception through Commodity and Fetish in
Severance and *Insurrecto*

Chanel, Clinique, Hermes, Juicy Couture, Contempo Casuals, Clergerie, Coca-Cola, L'Occitane; these brands pop up repeatedly in both *Severance*, by Ling Ma, and *Insurrecto*, by Gina Apostol. Surprising and yet thoroughly familiar every time, they beg the question: what do branded items have to do with contemporary Asian-American literature? Throughout these novels, both female protagonists direct substantial amounts of attention toward noticing, identifying, possessing, and purchasing brand-name items. Moreover, through their awareness of the material goods that surround them, *Severance*'s Candace and *Insurrecto*'s Magsalin simultaneously construct an awareness of their own selves. Therefore, when thinking with Anne Cheng's conceptualization of Oriental femalehood as a "refract[ion]" of commercial "commodity" culture and "sexual fetishism" from "Ornamentalism: A Feminist Theory for the Yellow Woman," *Severance* and *Insurrecto* can be read as novels of gendered Asian American self-conception through the lens of materialism. **When reading with Cheng, the Asian female protagonists' interactions with material goods in both the novels *Insurrecto* and *Severance* reveal a fetishistic attention to brand-name commodities. Through this consciousness of brands, the postcolonial neoliberal Asian / American female subject conceptualizes herself by finding meaning from objects bought as a product of her own labor exploitation, evidenced in the few moments when this brand impulse is actually resisted, such as in the case of Candace's mother's green Fujianese face oil bottle and Magsalin's aubergine and olive green duffel bag.**

Cheng claims that "Asiatic femininity is, above all, a style. As such, it claims specificity but lends itself transferability." In other words, a gendered concept of the Oriental is formulated

by the thin veneer on the surface of anything substantially real. Artifice, it cloaks while constructing, making it possible to apply to broad categories of gender, race, and genre. “It can be enlisted by those wielding power and, more disturbingly, by those deprived of it” (Cheng). Stating that even those in less powerful racial or gender structures can weaponize Ornamentalism for their own use, Cheng allows for the possibility of an Asian female subject conceiving of herself through this lens as well. Then, the self would be subjecting her own identity to “Oriental female objectification... through the lenses of commodity and sexual fetishism” (Cheng). As seen in Candace and Magsalin’s relationships to material goods, the reconstruction of Ornamentalism by the Asian female self materializes from the products of global commerce, specifically in a postcolonial Asian / America. Afterall, “The dream of the yellow woman is... really a dream about the inorganic” (Cheng). The characters in *Severance* and *Insurrecto* reassemble their identities by conceiving of themselves through these inorganic objects; for their lives to have order, these objects must be branded.

There is perhaps no work that exemplifies this brand fixation more than *Severance* by Ling Ma, a post-apocalyptic novel that apprehends the Asian female body as the central locality of disease and global capitalism. Its protagonist, Candace, is preoccupied with merchandise. Every single item mentioned has to be branded, from the various imports in New York City to the cheaper wares in Hong Kong malls. Even the items raided from Walmart in a post-Shen Fever apocalypse are always meticulously labeled by their brand. It is never just medicine; instead, the novel must specify “Pepto-Bismol” (Ma 30). Candace’s overreliance on brands for a systemized understanding of her position in the world signifies that “she offers nothing but the congealment of commodification” (Cheng). As it is, Candace certainly fetishizes herself as a neoliberal subject who oversees the production and participates in the consumption of material

goods; applying Cheng to *Severance*, this reinforces Oriental female objectification through both the lenses of commodity and sexualization. Describing “Fuzhou Nighttime Feeling,” which Candace attributes to her childhood, as “partly sexual in nature, though it precedes sexual knowledge,” and stating that “If Fuzhou Feeling were a sound, it would be early/mid-nineties R&B. If it were a flavor, it would be the ice-cold Pepsi we drink,” Candace sexualizes her Chinese identity while still conceiving of it through American cultural capital (Ma, 98). As explained by Aaron Bartels-Swindells and Jane Hu in “Genre Fever,” “Over time, Candace supplements her memories of Fuzhou with cultural references to [America],” revealing that “To be “made in China,” Candace’s Asian American immigrant narrative suggests, is already and inevitably to feel through the generic categories of US commodities.” The reflexive relationship of China and America, and therefore the Asian/American self, reformulates itself through the fetishization of branded material exchange in “Fuzhou Nighttime Feeling.”

The ghostly presence of Candace’s mother throughout the text, however, adds an interesting moment of tension against the novel’s assumed brand fetish. Primarily remembered by Candace for her 3-Step Clinique skincare routine, her mother becomes posthumously refigured through routine and commodity culture; her addled older self calls Candace repeatedly to remind her to maintain her skincare regimen, and her ghostly figure comes to Candace when she’s imprisoned in L’Occitane, a store that sells skin products. Bartels-Swindells and Hu note that because “So much of Candace’s lingering attachment to her mother is routed through American brands and their attendant rituals, like the Clinique set,” such as when “Candace burns ‘Clinique anything’ as an oblation to her mother,” the “shiny commodity” of skincare “becomes freighted with personal significance for their diasporic mother-daughter relationship, an object for its cathexis.” This can also be seen when Candace recalls her childhood observation of this

skincare regimen: “[My mother] subscribed to the Clinique 3-Step skin-care regimen: Liquid Facial Soap Mild, Clarifying Lotion 2 (because she had dry combination skin, like me), and Dramatically Different Moisturizing Lotion” (Ma 62). Through the use of a simile, “like me,” in direct association with several products meant to fix their shared “dry combination skin,” Ma filters the connection between mother and daughter through the lens of labeled commodities. However, Candace also recollects that “there were times when [her mother would] finish with an extra unsanctioned step: Fujianese face oil... The oil was a mystery, tinted emerald green... imparting unknown medicinal qualities” (Ma 62). This step, “unsanctioned” by the consecrated 3-Step Clinique brand routine to which her mother “subscribe[s],” lingers in Candace’s mind long afterwards, and not only because the “myster[ious]” face oil with “unknown medicinal qualities” leans into a Saidean idea of the inscrutable Orient (Ma 62). Instead, Candace’s relationship to this product is marked by a noteworthy impulse to search for it. She states that she has “looked for that product everywhere, in both Cantonese Chinatowns, in Fujianese Chinatown, in Sunset Park, in Flushing, and never found it.” (Ma 63). In a global market economy, where every item ever wanted is available at a moment’s notice, the absence of the Fujianese face oil’s brand compels Candace to seek out its meaning in Chinese neighborhoods of New York City. It is the very lack of label that sticks in her mind; without it, she can not make sense of the oil’s vague, undetermined connections to her mother and China. Therefore, this moment of brand resistance can actually be seen as a demonstration of Candace’s reliance on brands for the construction of her Chinese-American identity.

Parallel to the reflexive relationship between China and America, exemplified by material goods in *Severance*, the trans-Pacific narrative between the Philippines and America featured in Gina Apostol’s *Insurrecto* assembles itself through both cultural and commercial branded

iconography. A reconstruction of the Philippines and the Filipino-American subject through the “[use of] postcolonialism and postmodernity,” *Insurrecto* “shows us the political fictions of colonialism and the nation-state, not only through its content but through its postmodern form” (Uychoco). In both texts, malls take on locative significance, the Hong Kong mall and the Indiana mall from Bob’s childhood, “haunted by a specifically American form of capitalist consumption,” acting as important settings in Candace’s narrative (Bartels-Swindells and Hu). In *Insurrecto*, however, the Ali Mall acts as “an insistence of argument regarding the landscape itself,” “a monument” and “metaphor” for “modern Manila, if not the Philippines itself” (Benitez). The “postmodern, renovated Ali Mall,” “filled with “serious gestures of commercial veneration” for Muhammad Ali, acts as another postmodern form used to perceive the postcolonial subject; this site of commercialism, named after an American cultural export, regenerates its novel’s genre (Apostol 67).

The Ali Mall, furthermore, is the location of the protagonist Magsalin’s first meeting with Chiara, a film director seeking to make a movie about the Philippines. Even though Chiara, generationally wealthy and famous, dons the “incognito look” of the vieux riche, Magsalin notes “the designer shoes (Clergerie) and her giant shades (also French: Chanel)” (Apostol 10). Elaborating, Magsalin claims “even an idiot [would know] she’s rich. Magsalin does not live in New York for nothing. People exist there only to shop,” suggesting that living in New York City served her a higher purpose of existence by learning to recognize designer goods (Apostol 10). Once again, the “Oriental female objectification” of the self “is refracted through the lenses of commodity and sexual fetishism,” particularly applicable in this case due to Apostol’s employment of light, fragmentations, and literal and figurative camera lenses (Cheng). Recalling the unlabeled Fujianese face oil, Magsalin’s “bag... that aubergine and olive duffel, made in

Venice,” now becomes a strong point of friction against Magsalin’s propensity to carefully observe the designer brands Chiara wears (Apostol 10). On the infrequent occasions the bag appears, Magsalin foregrounds its uniqueness as an unbranded item. Still in Ali Mall, “Magsalin takes out her non-Hermes bag, aubergine and olive, made in Venice. ‘I like your bag,’ Chiara says. ‘I have one exactly like it.’ Sure you do, thinks Magsalin” (Apostol 54). Magsalin refers to her bag as “non-Hermes,” a strange way to say it is non-designer or unbranded; as indicated by her contemptuous aside, “Sure you do,” Magsalin believes her bag is one of a kind because it has no brand and was instead made in Venice. By disregarding Chiara’s claim that she has the same bag, it becomes apparent that the uniqueness of the bag is important to Magsalin. In constructing her bag’s identity, she is simultaneously constructing the uniqueness of her own self. Finally, it is established that Chiara actually does have a similar bag when it is remarked that she “is carrying an aubergine and olive duffel bag and clutching her Hermes,” a direct reference to Magsalin’s description of “her non-Hermes bag” (Apostol 54, 119). The cumulative mentions of the bag throughout the novel finally pay off in a culminating mixup of both “green and purple duffel[s]” (Apostol 244). Magsalin has been defining her existence in an Asian female body by simultaneously resisting and embracing designer brand labels; in this moment, however, Magsalin and Chiara’s bags become one in the eyes of the Filipino police, allowing for colonizer and colonized, subject and filmmaker, and character and author to continuously fracture and recollate throughout the rest of the novel.

“Sometimes, disposable lives find themselves through disposable objects” (Cheng). Cheng asks, “Is this why some Asian women, given limited options, would rather be ornamental than Oriental?” Evidenced through noteworthy objects that escape or complicate the capitalist impulse to label all material goods, denoting their intrinsic worth and meaning, Candace and

Magsalin conceptualize themselves through the brand names of commercial, fetishizable objects, ultimately constructing their own self-concepts as gendered, postcolonial Asian / American beings within a neoliberal market economy.

Works Cited

- Apostol, Gina. *Insurrecto: A Novel*. United States, Soho Press, 2018.
- Benitez, Christian. "Gina Apostol, *Insurrecto: A Novel* and Dominic Sy, *A Natural History of Empire: Stories*." *Southeast Asian Review of English* /, vol. 57, no. 2, 2020, pp. 110–14, <https://doi.org/10.22452/sare.vol57no2.13>.
- Cheng, Anne Anlin. "Ornamentalism: A feminist theory for the yellow woman." *Critical Inquiry* 44.3 (2018): 415-446.
- Hu, Aaron Bartels-Swindells and Jane. "Genre Fever." *Post45*, 29 May 2021, post45.org/2020/10/genre-fever/.
- Ma, Ling. *Severance: A Novel*. United States, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2018.
- Uychoco, Marikit Tara Alto. "Apostol's Creed: Unveiling the Political Fictions of Colonialism and Nation in the Diasporic Novel." *Rupkatha Journal on Interdisciplinary Studies in Humanities*., vol. 14, no. 1, 2022, <https://doi.org/10.21659/rupkatha.v14n1.15>.