

KATHY JOHNSON BOWLES

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## The Color of Trauma

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“Those colors hurt my eyes,” remarked my friend Sarah as she observed the juxtaposition of Prussian blue and vermilion-colored materials in one of my artworks. The work’s content focuses on the trauma of harassment, threats, assault, discrimination, and defamation. Sarah’s words had stopped me in my tracks: the colors were inflicting pain, just as the piece conveyed the experience of trauma’s pain. My attention was captured by the implication that colors could literally become active as a physical body. This notion coupled with the profound trauma of events experienced globally in 2020 provided the impetus and sense of urgency to consider color and trauma more deeply.

My mind raced thinking about the color of trauma and the trauma of color. The color-coding of race and identity is a history of oppression and violence. Color maims and murders as with Scheele’s Green, orpiment, and cinnabar. Color takes over the body in the form of jaundice, scarlet fever, and cyanosis. In the Western industrial complex, grotesque metaphors abound in colors named Atomic Tangerine, Frostbite, and Mummy Brown. In this essay, in a series of vignettes illustrated by material culture, I explore the color of trauma and its intellectual genealogy. From color theory’s Aristotelian roots to the Age of Enlightenment to Western capitalism’s dominance, pain and suffering litter the color of trauma’s journey through time.

Psychologists, folklorists, and physicists often speak of colors as emotional touchstones, symbolic equivalents for cultural practice, and light, optics, and perception. And yet, “ugly” and “combative” characterize the history of color as trauma. In the context of *experiencing* color (rather than *seeing* color), color doesn’t always occupy a happy, idyllic space within the human imagination. It doesn’t just illuminate, beautify, and congratulate; color hurts, humiliates, and kills. It traumatizes and is traumatized. It is a violent weapon wielded for insidious, morally corrupt purposes.

A philosophical lens of new materialism and posthumanism enables a more expansive narrative of color. A series of questions frame my quest to understand the color of trauma and the trauma of color. Does color possess agency or quasi-agency, enabling it to “act” violently according to its own will? Can color communicate anger, rage, pain, or despair through its own “voice” and identity? Does color have “consciousness” and the ability to know, to inform, or to speak? Can color be morally corrupted in a play of brinkmanship? This essay explores these questions in four parts: Color as a Body—Light’s Suffering

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IMAGE 1. *Crayola's Atomic Tangerine and Trinity Detonation 1945*; illustration by Kathy Johnson Bowles.

and Joy, The Malignancy of Color, Murderous Color, and Insidious Smarm and Color as Parvenu.

#### COLOR AS A BODY—LIGHT'S SUFFERING AND JOY

*In Opticks: or, A Treatise of the Reflexions, Refractions, Inflexions and Colours of Light* (1704), Isaac Newton documents his experiments, observations, and theories on the physical behaviors and properties of visible light (optics). He proved light is composed of seven hues via the process of diffraction. These hues, dubbed Newton's Rainbow, are known in the popular vernacular as ROY G. BIV (red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo, and violet). Newton also delivered a list of philosophical musings or "queries" at the conclusion of the treatise. He added new queries in each subsequent edition of the volume—the last and thirty-first was added in 1730.<sup>1</sup> In these questions, he considers color as a "body" with "behaviors" and, perhaps, plants a philosophical seed.

*Zur Farbenlehre* (Theory of Colours, 1810) by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe spars with some of Newton's theories by calling for a deeper consideration of the

1. Isaac Newton, *Opticks: or, A Treatise of the Reflections, Refractions, Inflexions and Colours of Light* (London: Printed for Sam. Smith and Benj. Walford, 1704).

phenomenological aspects of color. Goethe forwards the notion of color as *a conscious* body capable of possessing and evoking an emotional response by asserting, “Colour are light’s suffering and joy.”<sup>2</sup> Goethe argues that the perception of color is subjective and varies for each viewer.<sup>3</sup> Goethe assigns color the ability to interact—color acts as a “being” with other “beings” concretely in space rather than just an intangible phenomenon of light explained mathematically. For Goethe, color “knows” and “communicates” as a being with other living beings. This is the materiality of color.

While Goethe’s experiments and theories were considered flawed and rejected by the scientific community, the concepts captured artists’ and philosophers’ imaginations. In 1840, Charles Lock Eastlake translated Goethe’s treatise on color. Eastlake coupled the translation with his own notes he believed of interest to painters, such as the use of complementary color, harmony, contrast, and gradation. Eastlake’s notes made pointed distinctions between color as light and color as pigment.<sup>4</sup>

Perhaps there is no other artist more relevant to the color of trauma in the context of Eastlake’s translation than J. M. W. Turner. At the Royal Academy of Arts in London, Turner lectured to his students on color and read, reflected, and annotated Goethe’s *Theory of Colours*.<sup>5</sup> Turner’s work visualizing the traumatic forces of nature through color created a revolutionary path toward modernism.

Prior to this time, color in painting primarily defined “local color,” the color of an object. For example, the sky is blue; leaves are green. Color was of tertiary import following the application of light and shade to model form known as “chiaroscuro” (originating in the Italian Renaissance) and the application of perspective. Through Turner, color becomes material subject rather than a tool to colorize a three-dimensional object in space or as a symbolic equivalent for a singular human emotion. Turner is skeptical regarding the attribution of a specific color with a particular emotion—for example, yellow as embodying happiness.<sup>6</sup> Color is a body, a force, and a personality capable of exuding its own unique physicality and determinism. The emotional qualities of color are situational, evoking a visceral response of profound terror and fear. Color as powerful sentient being capable of destruction and death emerges in Turner’s *Burning of the Houses of Parliament* (c. 1834–35), *Shade and Darkness—the Evening of the Deluge* (1843), and *Snow Storm—Steam-Boat Off a Harbor’s Mouth* (1842).

2. “The Science of Color,” Smithsonian Libraries, <https://library.si.edu/exhibition/color-in-a-new-light/science>.

3. Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Zur Farbenlehre* (Theory of Colours) (German 1810), English trans. Charles Lock Eastlake (London: John Murray, Ablemarle Street, 1840).

4. Linda M. Shires, “Color Theory—Charles Lock Eastlake’s 1840 Translation of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe’s *Zur Farbenlehre* (Theory of Colours),” *BRANCH: Britain, Representation, and Nineteenth-Century History*, [www.branchcollective.org/?ps\\_articles=linda-m-shires-color-theory-charles-lock-eastlakes-1840-translation-of-johann-wolfgang-von-goethes-zur-farbenlehre-theory-of-colours](http://www.branchcollective.org/?ps_articles=linda-m-shires-color-theory-charles-lock-eastlakes-1840-translation-of-johann-wolfgang-von-goethes-zur-farbenlehre-theory-of-colours).

5. John Gage, *Color and Meaning: Art, Science, and Symbolism* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1999), 162–68.

6. Gage, *Color and Meaning*, 162–68.

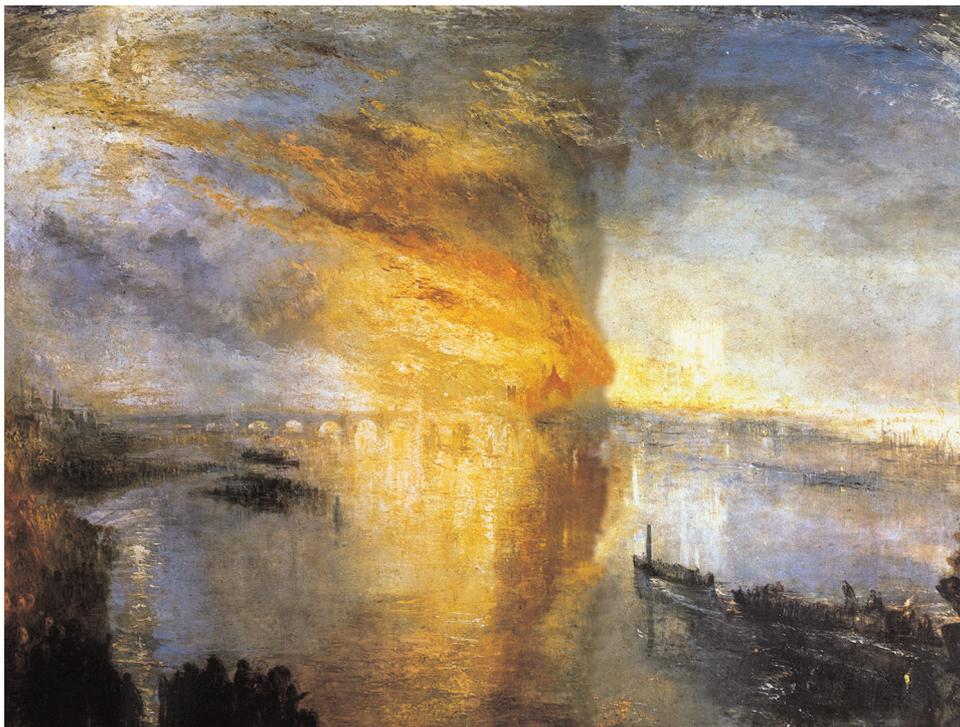


IMAGE 2. *The Burning of the Houses of Lords and Commons* (1835) by J. M. W. Turner; collection of the Cleveland Museum of Art.

Before the nineteenth century there was a limited hierarchy for worthy artistic content: history, landscape, still life, and portraiture painting. After Turner, other artists imbued color with a capacity to communicate with humans and interact with its own kind. Late nineteenth-century pointillism illustrates the concept of color as a physical being. Color has intercourse or, if one likes, “procreates”—color reproduces by juxtaposition, with a new color being pushed and pulled through space, “born” through a sort of visual labor and delivery.

Abstract expressionist artists of the mid-twentieth century gave form to the nature of the color “body” with often raw, brutal, violent, and painful body-informed gestures. Elaine de Kooning once described the process of painting thus: “For one thing, I want gesture—any kind of gesture, all kinds of gesture—gentle or brutal, joyous or tragic; the gestures of space soaring, sinking, streaming, whirling; the gesture of light flowing or spurting through color.”<sup>7</sup> Color’s capacity to express action and reaction is evident in Helen Frankenthaler’s painting *Flood* (1967). Frankenthaler once said, “I think of my pictures as explosive landscapes, worlds and distances, held on a flat surface.”<sup>8</sup> For Frankenthaler, color is a being that occupies space and interacts in time. Color is a physical presence.

In Josef Albers’s seminal work, *The Interaction of Color* (1963), he attests to color as a living, physical being with a full spectrum of personalities and ability to “act,” even

7. Rose Slivka, *Elaine de Kooning: The Spirit of Abstract Expressionism: Selected Writings* (New York: George Braziller, 1994), 175–76.

8. E. A. Carmean Jr., *Helen Frankenthaler: A Paintings Retrospective* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1989), 99.

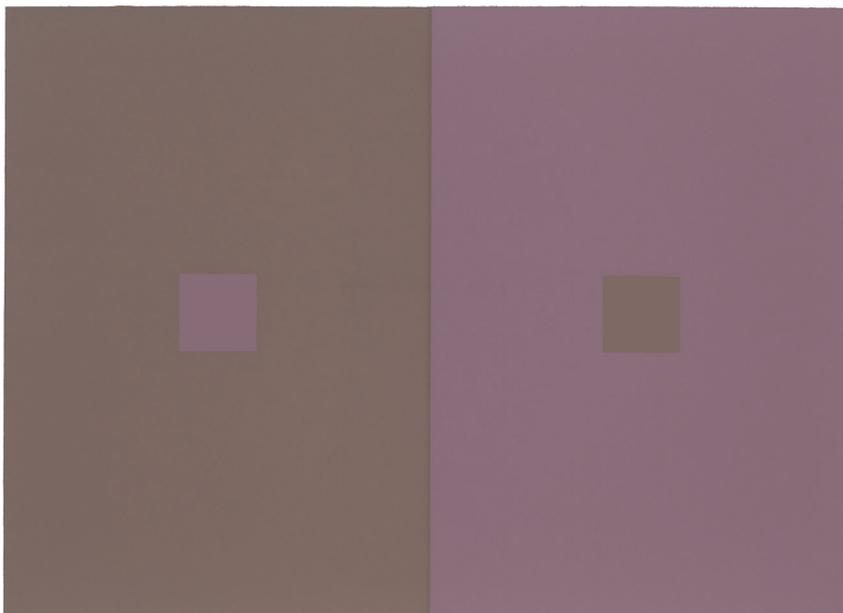


IMAGE 3. *Image VI-4: 3 colors appear as 2* from *The Interaction of Color* (1963) by Josef Albers.

malevolently to induce trauma. Consider the title of Albers's introduction to the book, "A Color Has Many Faces." The reference to the case study by Corbett H. Thigpen and Hervey M. Cleckley and subsequent film, *The Three Faces of Eve* (1957, directed by Nunnally Johnson), appears undeniable. Based upon a factual account, *The Three Faces of Eve* tells the story of a woman with dissociative identity disorder, triggered by the childhood trauma of being made to kiss a corpse. Her personalities are named Eve White, Eve Black, and Jane. The story chronicles the dominance and submission of Eve Black and Eve White until Jane emerges as Black and White's ultimate melding.

To cast color as possessing individual identities with personalities is a profound declaration. Albers compels the reader to "try to find those colors which are more inclined to exert influence and to distinguish them from those which will accept influence."<sup>9</sup> When describing the image he designates as "VI-4: 3 colors appear as 2," he notes,

On brown and violet grounds, the center squares look like the grounds exchanged, violet and brown. But they are of the same color, precisely alike, and at the same time refer to neighboring grounds. The true color of the two central squares, therefore become unrecognizable, as it loses its identity.<sup>10</sup>

Albers changes the definition of color from an inanimate object, a "thing," to a "being" with "identity." Color emerges as a *fact of being* with unique attributes, singular experiences, and discernable points of view.

9. Josef Albers, *The Interaction of Color*, 50th anniversary ed. (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2013), 8.

10. Albers, *The Interaction of Color*, 90.

## THE MALIGNANCY OF COLOR

Color's nuanced identity based upon its context relative to another color creates a jumping-off point. Having agency or a type of quasi-agency, color "acts" according to its own autonomy and free will. It asserts a moral conviction of the primacy of self—in harmony with or in opposition to other colors. The paradoxical relation of domination and antagonistic dualisms grounds the essay "A Cyborg Manifesto" (1985) by Donna J. Haraway. Her work is central to the notion of color as a sentient body.

Haraway calls for "a breakdown of boundaries," including "human and animal," "animal-human and machine," and "physical and non-physical." The problematic taxonomy of dualisms (self/other, culture/nature, male/female, civilized/primitive, etc.) is "systematic to the logics and practices of domination of women, people of color, nature, workers, animals . . . all [those] constituted as others."<sup>11</sup> In this context, color is "other." It is a *body existing in space* rather than the construct of color as human perception in Western culture.

What destruction and trauma does color impose as a dualism? In her book *The History of White People* (2010), Nell Irvin Painter makes the color of trauma vivid via the experience of race. She traces the naming of white people as "Caucasian" to Johann Friedrich Blumenbach, a German physician, naturalist, and anthropologist who developed theories on race. Painter offers, among other revelations, that through the lens of the Eurocentric (and narcissistic) Enlightenment, colors assigned to race are the result of trauma and are traumatic.<sup>12</sup>

The father of binomial nomenclature, Carl Linnaeus, first assigned taxonomy to the human species, *Homo sapiens*. He recognized four sub-species based upon geography: *H. s. americanus*, *H. s. europaeus*, *H. s. asiaticus*, and *H. s. afer*. Building on the idea, Blumenbach classified the human species into five hierarchical races or "varieties" via body measurements (including that of skulls, which he collected). He also factored in a skin color hierarchy—"1. white, 2. yellow, olive-tinged, 3. copper-colored, 4. tawny, 5. tawny-black, pitchy-blackness." He deemed "white" as the most beautiful and the Georgian people who lived in the Caucasus Mountains the embodiment of the ideal. Hence, he termed "Caucasian" skin.<sup>13</sup>

Blumenbach's determination was based upon assessing a female skull given to him by Baron Georg Thomas von Asch. Blumenbach deemed the skull a perfect specimen and the most beautiful he had ever examined. In a letter that accompanied the skull, Asch reported the skull was from a young Georgian woman captured by Russians during the second Caucasian War. She had died in Moscow from venereal disease. Painter concludes, "Ironically, perhaps, the woman whose skull gave white people a name had been a sex slave in Moscow, like thousands of her compatriots in Russia and the Ottoman

11. Donna J. Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late 20th Century," in *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 149–81.

12. Nell Irvin Painter, *The History of White People* (New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 2010), 72–83.

13. Painter, *The History of White People*, 72–83.

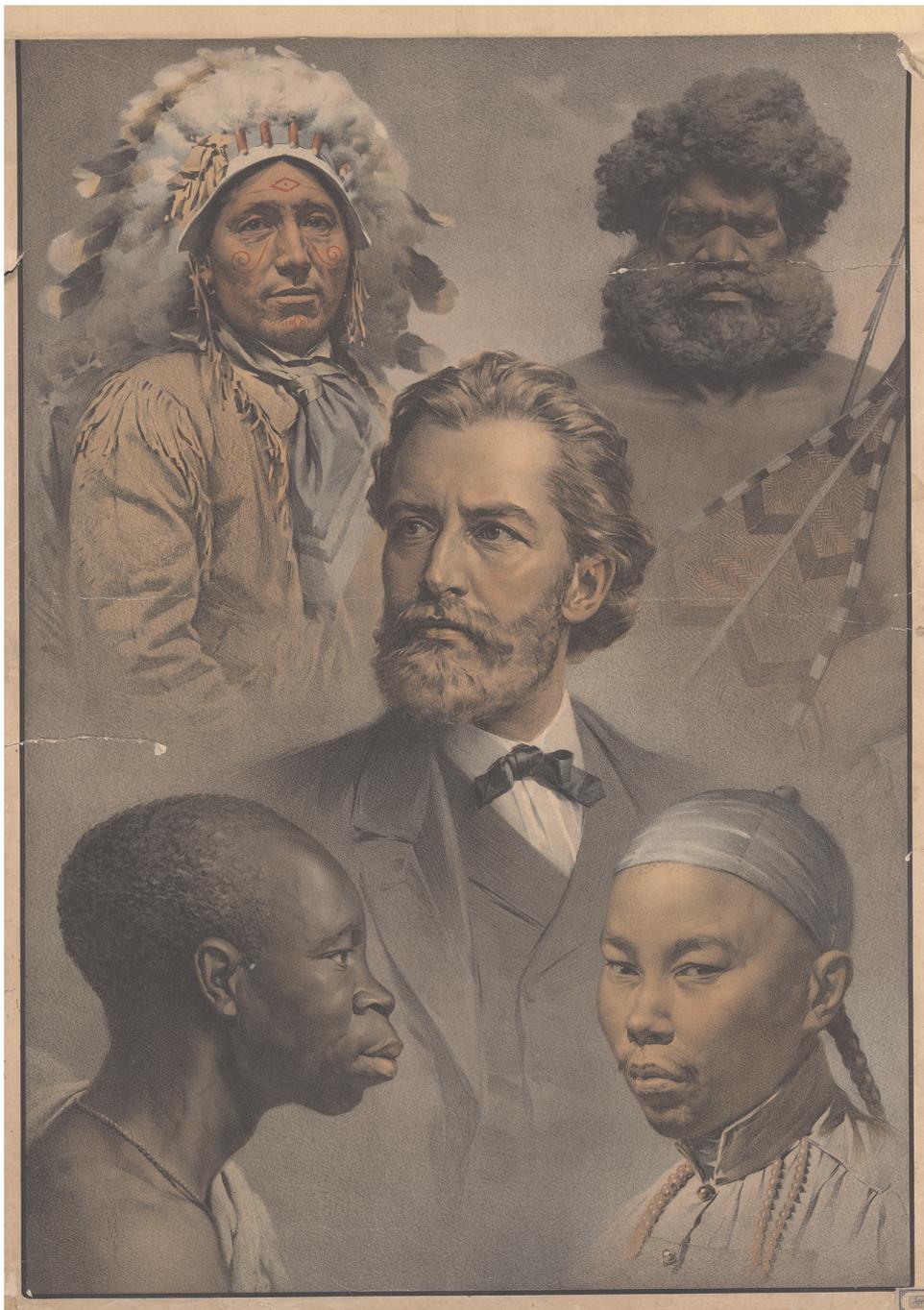


IMAGE 4. *The five races of mankind*, wall chart (1911) by G. Ellka; published by C. C. Meinhold und Söhne, Dresden, Germany; collection Forschungsstelle Historische Bildmedien, Universität Würzburg, Germany.

Empire.”<sup>14</sup> Blumenbach disembodies color both literally and figuratively. Color stands for everything, but there is no person, no name or identity associated with “Caucasian.” She is invisible. A ghost. An afterimage. And she haunts Western culture for hundreds of years.

Color’s disembodiment is evident in the assignment of “red” to Native American peoples. The name “Redskins,” as well as blood quantum laws, represent violence to the body. The name obliterates and disappears, strips away being-ness and dismembers identity. While Blumenbach coded *H. s. americanus* as “copper-colored,” the renaming “red” vividly stands in for the results of a malignant and bloody hierarchy. The history of naming Native American people “redskins” remains a matter of debate (it is unclear if the British military used the term first or if Native American chiefs first used the term to describe their people, and the phrase used was translated into English by the British as “redskin” in the late 1700s). We do know it was in common use by the 1800s, with President James Madison using related paternalistic phrases such as “red people” and “red children” in 1812.<sup>15</sup>

Racial slurs and epitaphs of violence have been used with insidious impunity and disparagement via sports team mascots throughout the twentieth century and continue today. Only in 2020, after decades of activism and legal work by Native Americans and allies, did the Washington and Cleveland football teams (and other institutions) drop the names “Redskins” and “Indians” along with associated trademarked emblems. *Ending the Legacy of Racism in Sports & the Era of Harmful “Indian” Sports Mascots* (2013), by the National Congress of American Indians, reported that there are more than two thousand institutions with mascots relating to Native American peoples and culture.<sup>16</sup>

Salish artist Jaune Quick-to-See Smith delivers an acerbic critique of the assignment of the color “red” to indigenous peoples in her artwork *I See Red: Target* (1992). The work, a scathing commentary of Christopher Columbus’s colonization of America, was the first painting by a Native American artist to enter the National Gallery of Art’s collection. In response to the 2020 acquisition, the artist states, “Because of popular myth-making Native Americans are seen as vanished. It helps assuage the government’s guilt about an undocumented genocide, as well as stealing the whole country.” She adds, “It’s like we don’t exist, except in movies or as mascots for sports teams.”<sup>17</sup> Color becomes an accomplice for the dehumanization and objectification of an entire race of people.

14. Painter, *The History of White People*, 72–83.

15. “From James Madison to the Delegations of Several Indian Nations, [ca. 22 August] 1812,” *Founders Online*, National Archives, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Madison/03-05-02-0137>. [Original source: *The Papers of James Madison*, Presidential Series 5, 10 July 1812–7 February 1813, ed. J. C. A. Stagg, Martha J. King, Ellen J. Barber, Anne Mandeville Colony, Angela Kreider, and Jewel L. Spangler (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2004, 175–78).]

16. “Ending the Legacy of Racism in Sports & the Era of Harmful ‘Indian’ Sports Mascots,” National Congress of American Indians, 2013, [www.ncai.org/resources/ncai\\_publications/ending-the-legacy-of-racism-in-sports-the-era-of-harmful-indian-sports-mascots](http://www.ncai.org/resources/ncai_publications/ending-the-legacy-of-racism-in-sports-the-era-of-harmful-indian-sports-mascots).

17. Nadja Sayej, “‘It’s like we don’t exist’: Jaune Quick-to-See Smith on Native American artists,” *The Guardian*, July 29, 2020, [www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2020/jul/29/jaune-quick-to-see-smith-native-american-art](http://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2020/jul/29/jaune-quick-to-see-smith-native-american-art).

The color-coding system of Germany's Third Reich applied the concepts of Blumenbach's system. Colored single or double triangles identified those "less than" or "other" in concentration camps. A chart detailed attribution of color, shape, and associated identity. A pink-colored triangle pointing downward identified (primarily) "homosexual"<sup>18</sup> men, for example. The origin of the pink triangle used by the Nazis comes from the downward-facing triangle, an ancient symbol associated with the feminine spirit. "Pink" is "female" in relationship to "white" as "male." In this sense, all women are "pink" and become "other" but also "pink" joins with the otherness of "yellow," "red," and "black." Therefore, "female-ness" and "pink-ness" becomes a slur.

During the second-wave feminist movement of the 1960s, '70s, and '80s, the color pink was rejected as an assignment of identity.<sup>19</sup> Using pink clothing to identify female infants was scorned.<sup>20</sup> Some adult women of this generation once refused to wear pink because it symbolized the infantilization of women. Other implications of "pink" identity and "pink" voice are discussed later in the essay. "Pink" undertones and overtones have also been used to degrade people of color and members of the LGBTQ community. Reclaiming "pink" has been an important aspect of empowerment.

In an abject moment, the pink triangle was reclaimed as a measure of pride for the LGBTQ community in the 1970s. The pink triangle even appears in the cult film classic *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (1975, directed by Jim Sharman): Dr. Frank N. Furter wears the symbol. Most significantly, the reappropriated symbol became a rallying cry for activists during the AIDS crisis in the late 1980s and '90s. The pink triangle facing upward on a black background was coupled with the phrase "Silence = Death" on a poster created by the Silence = Death Project to raise awareness of AIDS in New York City. The Aids Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP) adopted that image to bring greater awareness of the AIDS crisis.

Blumenbach's concept of a hierarchical taxonomy reverberates in Jim Crow laws of racial segregation in the United States during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Photographer Gordon Parks provides a window to view this world in the photo-essay "The Restraints: Hidden and Open" (1956) for *Life* magazine. Parks lays bare the ugly truths of Black Southern life. As if to remove the black and white lines of segregation, Parks employs color photography. The inhumanity and concreteness of lived experience become visible and real—no longer an abstract concept of "separate but equal." *Department Store, Mobile, Alabama* (1956) features a neon red-orange sign that reads

18. "Classification System in Nazi Concentration Camps," Holocaust Encyclopedia, US Holocaust Memorial Museum, Washington, DC, <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/classification-system-in-nazi-concentration-camps>.

19. The color lavender also played a significant role in the second wave of feminism. A group of lesbian women and radical feminists protested when lesbians were excluded from the Second Congress to Unite Women in May 1970. They fought against what Betty Friedan coined as the "lavender menace." Friedan believed including lesbians would hurt the feminist movement because women stereotyped as "man-hating" would be easy to dismiss.

20. Jo B. Paoletti, *Pink and Blue: Telling the Boys from the Girls in America* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2012).

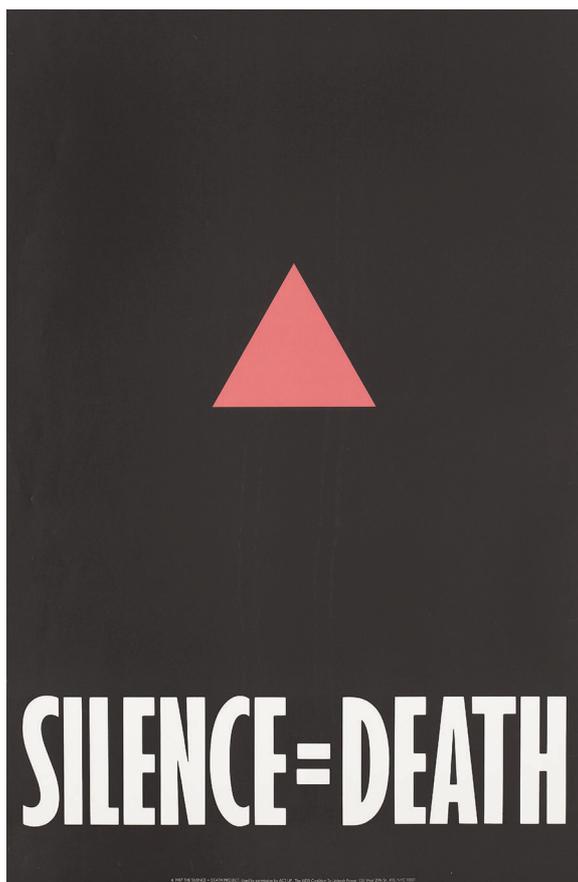


IMAGE 5. “Silence = Death” poster (1987) created by the Silence = Death Project to raise awareness of AIDS in New York City. AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP) adopted the image to bring greater awareness of the AIDS crisis.

“Colored Entrance.” It seems to scream aggressively at a fashionably well-dressed black mother and daughter standing below. Even the word “colored” used by whites during this time period in American history is a slur (by the twenty-first century the word would be reclaimed as “people of color”).

The effects of Blumenbach’s palette of trauma came to a head in 2020 with an outpouring of anger over systematic racism and violence toward people of color including the murders of George Floyd and many, many others. Public monuments to Blumenbach’s palette of malignancy were toppled. On June 26, 2020, amid the national debate about Confederate monuments, poet Caroline Randall Williams wrote an opinion piece for the *New York Times* titled “You Want a Confederate Monument? My Body Is a Confederate Monument.” Her words “I have rape-colored skin” represent some of the most powerful written in recent memory, and especially in the context of color as experience/the color of trauma.

Williams continues, “It is an extraordinary truth of my life that I am biologically more than half white, and yet I have no white people in my genealogy in living memory. No. Voluntary. Whiteness. I am more than half white, and none of it was consensual.”<sup>21</sup> She reframes and claims identity distinct from a social class system that once labeled such ancestry in the derogatory Southern slang “High Yellow” (“High Yellar” or “High Yella”), with “High” being slang for “very” and “yellow” as in Blumenbach’s rankings. The phrase is referenced in songs including the folk song *The Yellow Rose of Texas* (the earliest known reference to this song is from 1853 and it allegedly referred to a woman named Emily West, who was of mixed race), and more recently, in rapper Lil’ Wayne’s *I’m Good* (2009).

If color is both the oppressor and oppressed, does an afterimage of terror also exist as color? H. P. Lovecraft’s fear of the “other” as represented by race compelled him to pen *The Color Out of Space* (1927). He created an alien being that was color itself. Color wrought fear and trembling, something that sucked the life (and whiteness/visible light) out of everything it encountered. He writes, “They had uncovered what seemed to be the side of a large coloured globule imbedded in the substance. The colour, which resembled some of the bands in the meteor’s strange spectrum, was almost impossible to describe; and it was only by analogy that they called it colour at all.”<sup>22</sup> Lovecraft’s glowing “color” terrorized in a manner that combined science fiction and horror genres and was firmly rooted in racism.

Fear of the “other” has given birth to many atrocities and movements against people of color. “Yellow Peril,” first referenced by Kaiser Wilhelm II of Germany in 1895, reflects Caucasian fears that East Asian countries would take over Western countries. Yellow Peril became a campaign to demonize East Asian people and cultures. In the US, the Chinese Exclusion Act banned Chinese immigration from 1882 to 1943. During World War II, the US incarcerated one hundred thousand Japanese Americans. East Asians have been stereotyped and demeaned in art, literature, and film, including Sax Rohmer’s novel *The Mystery of Dr. Fu-Manchu* (1913) and later film adaptations such as *The Mysterious Dr. Fu-Manchu* (1929). Contemporary artist Roger Shimomura confronts, dissects, and lampoons these notions in his irreverent works such as *Yellow Terror* (2008).

Naming East Asians “yellow” is a racial slur. In her September 27, 2018, article for National Public Radio, “If We Called Ourselves Yellow,” journalist Kat Chow asserts that “yellow” is a word fraught with noxious racism “on par with Chink, gook, nip or Chinaman.”<sup>23</sup> Michael Keevak, in *Becoming Yellow: A Short History of Racial Thinking* (2011), traces the slur’s history and associations to Linnaeus, who assigned the color “luridus” to what he termed *Homo sapiens asiaticus* in his classification of humans. “Luridus” means lurid, sallow, pale yellow. Linnaeus also uses the color to describe

21. Caroline Randall Williams, “You Want a Confederate Monument? My Body Is a Confederate Monument,” Opinion, *New York Times*, June 26, 2020, [www.nytimes.com/2020/06/26/opinion/confederate-monuments-racism.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/26/opinion/confederate-monuments-racism.html).

22. H. P. Lovecraft, “The Colour Out of Space,” in *Amazing Stories* (New York: Experimenter Publishing, March 1927), [www.hplovecraft.com/writings/texts/fiction/cs.aspx](http://www.hplovecraft.com/writings/texts/fiction/cs.aspx).

23. Kat Chow, “If We Called Ourselves Yellow,” *Code Switch*, National Public Radio, September 27, 2018, [www.npr.org/sections/codeswitch/2018/09/27/647989652/if-we-called-ourselves-yellow](http://www.npr.org/sections/codeswitch/2018/09/27/647989652/if-we-called-ourselves-yellow).

unhealthy as well as toxic plants. The association is striking and wrought with degradation of East Asian people.<sup>24</sup>

Blumenbach's taxonomy of race and skin color is a palette of malignancy. Once one visualizes this palette, it appears everywhere trauma appears like a pattern of criminal behavior. It is difficult to un-see and ignore. When examining some of the most searing, painful images of trauma in art and film history, the palette seems to reoccur. Consider these works: Francisco Goya's *The Third of May 1808* (1814), Norman Krasna's *Lest We Forget (The Liberation of Buchenwald)* (1945), and Nan Goldin's *Nan One Month After Being Battered* (1984). All the images in these projects share two characteristics: subject matter dealing with trauma and Blumenbach's palette of malignancy. The colors used in all are eerily similar. If one uses Pantone's app to create a color palette for each image (or still image from *Lest We Forget*), a pattern for trauma's palette emerges—Blumenbach's five colors.

Color lives and breathes in and out. It communicates fear, anger, rage, pain, and despair through its voice in reaction to another. In the taxonomy of dualisms, color pushes and pulls as a force to assert identity, to maintain a sense of self. As a body, its energy exists and emerges only to be met with an opposing force. Color is, according to Newton's Third Law of Physics, a body interacting with another body. The interactions are frictional, tensional, applied as contact, and gravitational, electrical, magnetic at a distance. The summary of Newton's assertion is, "For every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction." If we are to base an understanding of the world on this premise, is it surprising color can be trauma?

### MURDEROUS COLOR

A quest for dominance predicts a narrative of conflict—a riot of color. In an androcentric philosophy, dualism frames conflict such as man versus nature, man versus man, etc. The androcentric body positions itself in opposition to unknown, feared, and uncontrollable bodies, collectively known as the "other." In the conflict with man, color as "other" exhibits a propensity for "violence" or "murderous" behavior. As a material existing in nature, color interacts aggressively with the human body on a molecular level. Color kills; color traumatizes the physical body.

At the core of "man versus color" lies a moral judgment. The morality of color can be traced through Aristotle. He postulated color theory in terms of dualities and the nature of god—light is white and embodies goodness; darkness is black and embodies evil. White is life; black is death. These views informed the Eurocentric Christian patriarchal system, the Enlightenment, and theories about the nature of color. But what if color doesn't exist to serve this system? What if color doesn't share a belief in a god who acts through a human male-centered point of view? For example, what if

24. Michael Keevak, *Becoming Yellow: A Short History of Racial Thinking* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011).

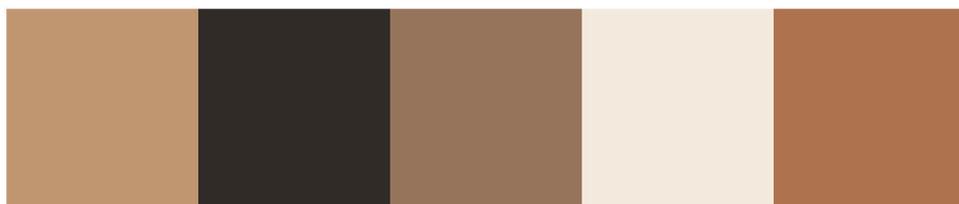


IMAGE 6. Johann Friedrich Blumenbach's five colors representing the five races of mankind with Francisco Goya's, *The Third of May 1808* (1814); collection of Museo del Prado; illustration by David Whaley.

color doesn't subscribe to a morality that considers death undesirable? What if color is programmed to participate in death? What if color's existence isn't based upon Newton's system of color hierarchy—primary, secondary, and tertiary—and doesn't behave in ways Newton predicts? Perhaps the color of trauma is the self-fulfilling prophecy borne of Western philosophy's focus on control and dominance. Maybe we already know this.

Color acts aggressively and takes over bodies in the process of disease and death. Indeed, color and its transformation of the body informs the names (historical and contemporary) and diagnoses of many diseases, disorders, and conditions. Black: death,

fever, pox, vomit, blackwater fever. Yellow: fever (bronze John), jaundice. Red/Pink: scarlet fever, pink eye, rose cold (hay fever), rosacea, scarlet rash (roseola), sanguineous crust, rufous urine. Purple: allergic purpura. Green: fever (anemia).

The color of trauma, death, and disease finds visualization in Edvard Munch's paintings. *The Sick Child* (1907) depicts the effects of "White Plague" (tuberculosis) on the artist's sister. The color white all but envelops the ghostly white-skinned figure. In *Inheritance* (1897–99), Munch depicts the colors of congenital syphilis on a baby's naked body lying limply in a mother's lap. Ivan Albright graphically depicts the nature of death and decay through color. Albright created the titular painting for the 1943 film adaptation of Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (directed by Albert Lewin). In Albright's *Into the World There Came a Soul Called Ida* (1929–30), the figure's skin is depicted in lurid shades of blues and purples akin to patients with cyanosis (a condition where the skin turns bluish-purple due to a lack of circulation and blood oxygenation).

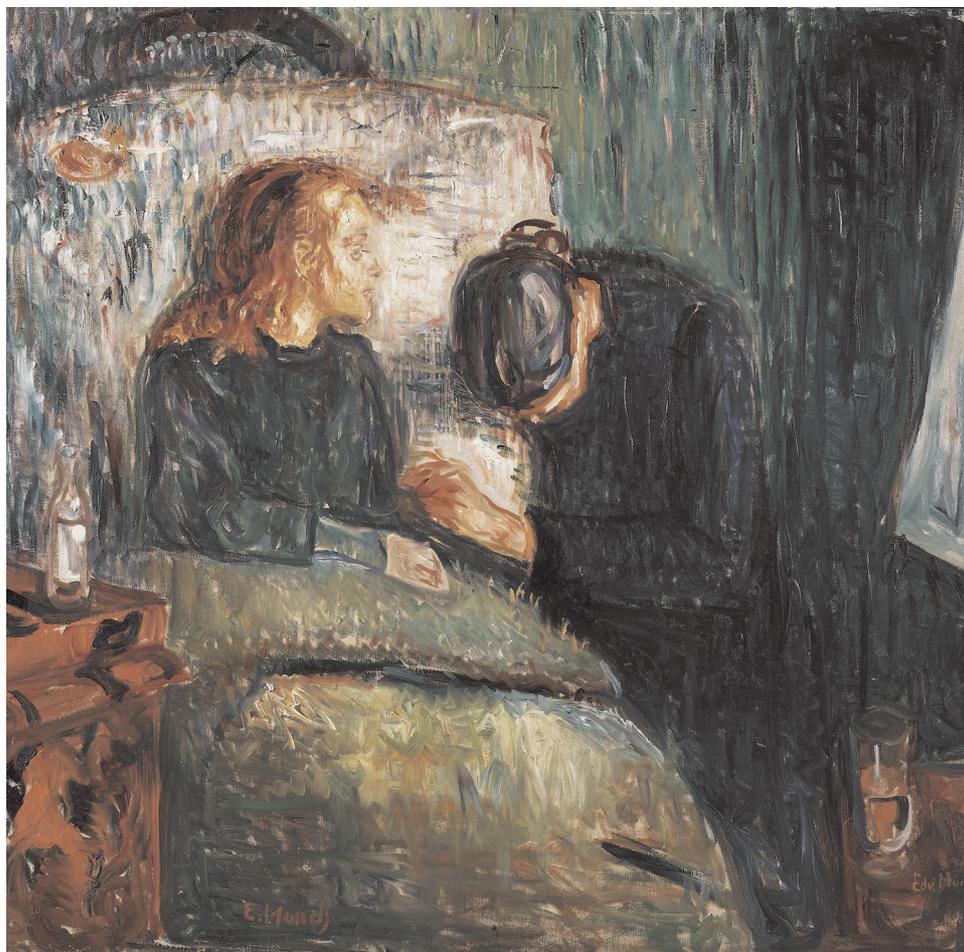


IMAGE 7. *The Sick Child* (1907) by Edvard Munch; collection of Tate Modern.

Not only does color infiltrate the body as trauma, color, as pigment, has been created from the trauma inflicted on bodies. Ivory black is made from bone char—the burned bones of animals, originally the tusks of elephants (ivory)—and was used by many artists throughout the ages. Édouard Manet's portrait *Berthe Morisot with a Bouquet of Violets* (1872) is a stunning example. Today, bone char is made from cattle and pig bones.

The pigment named “Mummy Brown” (also known as “Egyptian Brown” and “Caput Mortuum,” French for “dead head”) was made from ground mummy corpses and produced from the twelfth to the mid-twentieth century. Eugène Delacroix used the color in the Salon de la Paix paintings in the Paris Hôtel de Ville. London color manufacturers O'Hara and Hoar placed an ad in the London *Daily Mail* on July 30, 1904, hoping to procure Egyptian mummies. The ad read, in part, “Surely, a 2000-year-old mummy of an Egyptian monarch may be used in adorning a noble fresco in Westminster Hall or elsewhere without giving offense to the ghost of the departed gentleman or his descendants.”<sup>25</sup> Creating color from trauma illustrates Eurocentric and androcentric primacy. Othered bodies only exist to serve/represent a moral bankruptcy in Eurocentricism.

Other colors associated with animal and human rights hauntings include sang de boeuf (oxblood) and gamboge. Sang de boeuf is named for the color of blood flowing from an ox or cow upon slaughter. Sang de boeuf glazes played heavily in the ceramics from eighteenth-century China's Qing dynasty (1644–1912). The pigment gamboge, deep saffron to mustard yellow color, is produced from the resin of the gamboge tree found in Cambodia. The resin can take up to two years to gather as the resin is collected from the trees much like the sap used to create maple syrup. During the May 21, 2012, *RadioLab* podcast “The Perfect Yellow,” the participants, journalist and co-host Jad Abumrad and Ian Garrett, former technical director for color manufacturer Winsor & Newton, recounted a story about gamboge. When Winsor & Newton broke down resin chunks in the 1980s, bullets were discovered within the resin. The bullets were believed to be associated with the Killing Fields, where millions were murdered and buried by the Khmer Rouge regime since gamboge trees grew in the same fields. The two men speculated on the morality of selling pigments attached to genocide and war. Garrett stated, “Colors are sometimes soaked in blood. That's just how it is.”<sup>26</sup> The association between color and bloodshed is not just an offhand remark. Color is inexorably tied to the health and well being of other bodies.

Slavery, oppression, and exploitation are inexorably tied to the color blue. Catherine McKinley, author of *Indigo: In Search of the Color that Seduced the World* (2012), has documented how indigo cultivation was brought to the US in the 1700s via enslaved Africans and exploited for profit. It was more valuable than cotton and sugar. She states,

25. Kassia St Clair, *The Secret Lives of Color* (New York: Penguin Books, 2017), 253–55.

26. “The Perfect Yellow,” *Radiolab*, WNYU Studios, May 21, 2012, [www.wnycstudios.org/podcasts/radiolab/segments/211193-perfect-yellow](http://www.wnycstudios.org/podcasts/radiolab/segments/211193-perfect-yellow).



IMAGE 8. P. Lackerbauer (left) and Becquet freres (right), “Accidents produits par les verts arsenicaux (Accidents caused by the use of green arsenic)” (1859) in *Annales d’hygiène publique et de médecine légale* (1829–1922); The Wellcome Collection.

“It was used literally as a currency. They were trading one length of cloth, in exchange for one human body.”<sup>27</sup> Indigo blue is trauma.

Color is not “dead” or inanimate. It isn’t neutral or a part of a binary. It can act powerfully with animosity and hostility. Consider color’s intimacy with the human body as a toxin. It courses, merges, and emerges on a molecular level, knowing and responding contextually as a sentient being without regard for maleness/femaleness, good/bad, or a geopolitical hierarchy of primacy. The US Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) bans intimate bodily contact with numerous pigments including chromium-based pigments.<sup>28</sup> Throughout history, color has possessed a murderous agency. Green pigments, including Paris, Iris, Acid, and Scheele’s, have killed. Scheele’s Green, made from cupric hydrogen arsenic, was used to produce wallpapers in the 1800s. Wallpaper designed and executed with this color resulted in Napoleon’s death from

27. Catherine McKinley, “Indigo: The Indelible Color That Ruled The World,” interview by National Public Radio staff, *Tell Me More*, NPR, November 7, 2011, [www.npr.org/2011/11/07/142094103/indigo-the-indelible-color-that-ruled-the-world](http://www.npr.org/2011/11/07/142094103/indigo-the-indelible-color-that-ruled-the-world).

28. *Occupational Exposure to Hexavalent Chromium* (Federal Registration # 71:10099-10385), Occupational Health and Safety Administration, US Department of Labor, 2006, [www.osha.gov/laws-regs/federalregister/2006-02-28-0](http://www.osha.gov/laws-regs/federalregister/2006-02-28-0).

arsenic poisoning.<sup>29</sup> Numerous red and yellow pigments violently interact with the human body—Greek Vermilion via mercury, orpiment via arsenic sulfide, and Naples yellow via lead.

Minerals such as radium, chromium, and uranium have been used to produce yellow, orange, and red pigments for paint and ceramic glazes. These paints and glazes as used in manufacturing have storied histories. In the late 1930s, educator Frank W. Cyr advocated for children’s safety by suggesting all school buses be made more visible to motorists by painting them a bright yellow.<sup>30</sup> Ironically, the original “National School Bus Chrome” paint was made from the toxic hexavalent chromium (lead chromate yellow).<sup>31</sup>

Luminous paints in the early twentieth century also proved murderous. The yellow radium pigment used by the US Radium Company’s Undark brand from 1917 to 1938 to paint watch and clock dials caused anemia, bone fractures, and jaw necrosis. The experience of women who worked for the company (dubbed “Radium Girls”) and the resulting litigation have impacted occupational health and safety and labor rights ever since.<sup>32</sup>

The problem of color in the context of dualisms becomes the fact that color refuses to be controlled and subjugated. As a boundary-less body, it slips through the cracks of self-congratulatory and pompous logic. It continually pushes back by acting with autonomy, denying the patriarchal position of abuse of the “other.” Color rages against being “lesser than” in the narrative conflict. Not only does color act, color thinks, and speaks. Its voice imprints on other bodies as it speaks through holes in cheeks, and lesions on breasts and genitalia. How long can a suppressed voice go unheard? The color of trauma acts and finds a way to reveal truths in irrepressible ways.

#### INSIDIOUS SMARM AND COLOR AS PARVENU

The language of color becomes corrupted when translated into the language of capitalism. Without “knowing” and “understanding” color, corporations force color into speaking via the logic of power and domination. Through involuntary normalization color as “other” becomes a conduit for exploiting trauma. If the “other” has no value except in the service of producing wealth, it follows that the trauma experienced by the “other” can be employed for gain in capitalism. The color of trauma via the “other” is relegated to a “body” without standing, without value in and of itself. However, the color of trauma resists subjugation.

The story “The Yellow Wallpaper” (1892) by Charlotte Perkins Gilman illustrates the struggle of subjugation of the “other” and its irrepressible voice. The story, told in the form of journal entries, chronicles the experience of an unnamed woman forced to

29. St Clair, *The Secret Lives of Color*, 224–26.

30. Bryan Greene, “The History of How School Buses Became Yellow,” *Smithsonian Magazine*, smithsonianmag.com, September 4, 2019, [www.smithsonianmag.com/history/history-how-school-buses-became-yellow-180973041](http://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/history-how-school-buses-became-yellow-180973041).

31. Esther Inglis-Arkell, “That Famous ‘School Bus Yellow’ Color Used to Be Very, Very Toxic,” *Gizmodo*, July 9, 2015, <https://io9.gizmodo.com/that-famous-school-bus-yellow-color-used-to-be-very-1716714703>.

32. Jacopo Prisco, “Radium Girls: The dark times of luminous watches,” *CNN Style*, December 19, 2017, [www.cnn.com/style/article/radium-girls-radioactive-paint/index.html](http://www.cnn.com/style/article/radium-girls-radioactive-paint/index.html).

participate in a “rest cure” for depression. Having her own thoughts and voice contrary to serving her husband and home translates into the notion she has become a danger to herself and others. Doing nothing becomes an enforced measure of saving herself from her own ambition.

In the mansion rented for the woman’s “recovery,” the bedroom selected for her by her husband is a former nursery with walls covered in yellow wallpaper. The nursery symbolizes her infantilization; in essence, she is a “child” who needs to be “parented” by her husband (the hierarchy of dominance empowers men’s superiority). She describes the wallpaper (the prison of misogyny): “The color is repellent, almost revolting; a smoldering, unclean yellow, strangely faded by the slow-turning sunlight.”<sup>33</sup> She becomes obsessed with the wallpaper—the sickly sulfur color, the pattern. Seeing images of a woman trapped in the wallpaper, silent and powerless, she rips away the wallpaper to free her. Gilman seeks to illustrate patriarchal control over and suppression of the female voice by tortuous isolation and forced normalization of male power.

Color as “other” and “thing” is subjugated as a means to an end. Capitalism wields the language of color haphazardly. Like a parvenu, Western culture (especially in the US) constantly strives for economic prominence to achieve standing among older and more culturally developed civilizations. It is “new money” or “new dominance.” It lacks the knowledge and experience to consider the history, standing, and value in the “other.”

The voice of color becomes an affect of trauma, an insidious tool used by profiteers to ingratiate and lure. Capitalist color induces pain and suffering by *capitalizing* on trauma. Consider Susan Sontag’s words in *Regarding the Pain of Others* (2003): “our privileges are located on the same map as their suffering, and may—in ways we prefer not to imagine—be linked to their suffering, as the wealth of some may imply the destitution of others . . .”<sup>34</sup> Using the color of trauma for gain negates the pain associated with its creation. It is not a conceptual abstraction; trauma is experienced in real time and reverberates long after.

Grotesque metaphors abound in industrial color. Via companies like Crayola, children are taught to name a light sherbet-like peach color “Atomic Tangerine” (#ff9966) without a second thought to its inspiration—the atomic bomb’s mushroom cloud. This bomb caused the horrific deaths of hundreds of thousands of people in Japan. A bright neon green? “Screamin’ Green” (#66ff66). With a sociopathic lack of empathy, a maroon-colored crayon becomes “Dingy Dungeon” (#c32148) in Crayola’s “Silly Scents” line in 2006. Crayola touts, “Silly Scents markers, crayons and colored pencils contain fun-smelling colors that offer a multi-sensory scent-sation!”<sup>35</sup> creating a blood-colored product named after a place where torture is inflicted. And not to be confused with “Blizzard Blue” (#50bfe6), a light-lavender-blue Crayola crayon is “Frostbite” (#e936a7).<sup>36</sup>

Crayola isn’t the only company to name color for trauma. Companies including Dunn-Edwards, Behr, and Benjamin Moore all sell a “Yellow Brick Road” yellow paint to

33. Charlotte Perkins Gilman, “The Yellow Wallpaper,” *The New England Magazine* (1892).

34. Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (London: Picador, 2003), 102.

35. *Silly Scents*, Product Description, Crayola Corporation, <https://shop.crayola.com/featured/silly-scents>.

36. *Explore Color*, Crayola Corporation, [www.crayola.com/explore-colors.aspx](http://www.crayola.com/explore-colors.aspx).



## Period

Color inspired by  
**PANTONE®**

IMAGE 9. Pantone's "Period Red" chip commissioned by Swedish feminine care brand Intimina in 2020 and still image of character Maggie Prescott (Kay Thompson) singing "Think Pink!" from *Funny Face* (1957, directed by Stanley Donen); illustration by David Whaley.

capitalize on the road in *The Wizard of Oz* (1939, directed by Victor Fleming) where Dorothy and three others were stalked and attacked. More recently, Pantone rolled out "Period Red" in 2020. Vice president of the Pantone Color Institute, Laurie Pressman, described the color as "an active and adventurous red hue,"<sup>37</sup> while most women likely would call the color "Day Three." Commissioned by Swedish feminine care brand Intimina, the color is used in marketing the company's menstrual cup. In a press release, Danela Žagar, Intimina global brand manager, said, "Enough is enough, it's 2020. Isn't it time periods stop being considered as a private affair or a negative experience?"<sup>38</sup> Žagar seeks to make individual pain and suffering a collective and positive experience for financial gain.

A promise of happiness under the guise of color negates the reality of individual experience, and lacks empathy.<sup>39</sup> One can hardly divorce the association of "Period Red" with the "Think Pink" fashion campaign in the film *Funny Face* (1957, directed by

37. Sarah Cascone, "The Pantone Color Institute Has Introduced a New Red Hue to Encourage 'Period Positivity,'" September 30, 2020, <https://news.artnet.com/art-world/pantone-introduces-period-red-1911753>.

38. "Pantone Released a Period-Colored Paint and We're Here for It," *Blog/Menstruation*, Intimina Corporation, September 29, 2020, [www.intimina.com/blog/pantone-period-paint](http://www.intimina.com/blog/pantone-period-paint).

39. This passage was inspired by the work of Sara Ahmed. For example, in Ahmed's book *The Promise of Happiness* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), she states, "Let's take this figure of the feminist killjoy seriously. Does the feminist kill other people's joy by pointing out moments of sexism? Or does she expose the bad feelings that get hidden, displaced, or negated under public signs of joy? Does bad feeling enter the room when somebody expresses anger about things, or could anger be the moment when the bad feelings that circulate through objects get brought to the surface in a certain way?"

Stanley Donen). The associated musical number contains a vapid appeal to women with a song of the same name. As a means to be happy and lovely, the song compels women to wear the color pink: “Think pink! think pink! if you want that quelque chose” and “Now, I wouldn’t presume to tell a woman what a woman oughtta think, but tell her if she’s gotta think, think pink!” The premise of “Period Red” undermines the validity of women’s experience and seems to gaslight the public into believing that the pain and suffering associated with menstruation is just a figment of imagination to be willed away with a “positive” hue.

The Benetton group also co-opted color and trauma in its controversial “United Colors of Benetton” campaigns of the 1980s and ’90s with a smarmy promise of happiness and racial harmony via the purchase of clothing. In one Benetton ad from 1996, *Hearts*, a photograph by Oliviero Toscani graphically depicts three disembodied human (presumably) hearts, each separately labeled “white,” “black,” “yellow.”<sup>40</sup> It is a perverse logic to use traumatized bodies and death to traumatize the viewer into seeing everyone is equal. This is akin to the smug, false earnestness of the recent “Blue Lives Matter” campaign in opposition to the “Black Lives Matter” movement. Being “blue” in this context is a chosen profession with financial compensation and authority. Being “black” is not; it is a lived experience. Using “blue” as a parallel to “black” is a disingenuous false equivalent to justify racial injustice and alleviate “white” guilt.

Manufacturing decisions have often been based upon implicit bias with regard to who possesses power/value in the marketplace or share of the market. Those deemed to be less productive in acquiring wealth have less impact in determining the manufacture and availability of products. In response to these issues in relation to race, activist Preston Wilcox spearheaded militant publications like *White Is* (1970), a book of cartoons about the Black experience. One cartoon by Sandy Huffaker depicted a man in iconic Black Panther-related clothing with a white Band-Aid on his forehead. “White is a flesh colored band-aid,” reads the caption.<sup>41</sup>

The color of “flesh,” “skin,” or “nude” tone has had a narrow definition in US manufacturing: the color of *Caucasian* skin. This practice has been pervasive in the production of cosmetics, hosiery, lingerie, Band-Aids, crayons, color photographic film, and even the color palette used for printing. Crayola’s “flesh” crayon was a light peach color; Band-Aids’ bandages were a soft pink color. The printing of color photographic film used in both prints and movies has been historically balanced for Caucasian skin using an image known as a “Shirley card.” The “Shirley card,” named for the 1950s-era Kodak employee featured in the image holding a color reference card, was used to test color and density. Later, the models for these cards were referred to as “China girls” for their porcelain-colored skin. Companies ignored people of color as an important share of the market for such products. Even when products for people of color were produced,

40. *Historical Campaigns*, Image Gallery, Benetton Group, [www.benettongroup.com/media-press/image-gallery/institutional-communication/historical-campaigns](http://www.benettongroup.com/media-press/image-gallery/institutional-communication/historical-campaigns).

41. Sebastien Malo, “The Story of the Black Band-Aid, A reinvention of ‘flesh-colored,’” *The Atlantic*, June 6, 2013, [www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2013/06/the-story-of-the-black-band-aid/276542](http://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2013/06/the-story-of-the-black-band-aid/276542).

such as Ebon-Aide bandages, the items were segregated in a specific location of a pharmacy or department store away from “white” products.<sup>42</sup>

Only in the last ten years, with increased public pressure (and growing market share relative to “the browning of America”<sup>43</sup>), have companies made efforts to create products representative of a variety of skin tones. Pantone unveiled its *SkinTone Guide* of 110 colors for matching and reproducing skin tones in printing in 2012 (a far cry from Blumenbach’s five colors).<sup>44</sup> On May 22, 2020, CNN reported on Crayola’s release of the product *Colors of the World Skin Tone Crayons* (24 packs and 32 packs).<sup>45</sup> On June 12, 2020, CNN reported that Band-Aid had announced a new line of bandages that curiously includes five colors (like Blumenbach’s colors) and a donation to Black Lives Matter as well as a reported \$10 million to “fighting racism and in injustice in America.”<sup>46</sup>

Alignment with the “other” via speaking in the language of color has existed for more than one hundred years. *The Suffragist* newsletter of December 6, 1913, explained the symbolism associated with the colors used for representative banners and sashes: “Purple is the color of loyalty, constancy to purpose, unswerving steadfastness to a cause. White, the emblem of purity, symbolizes the quality of our purpose; and gold, the color of light and life, is as the torch that guides our purpose, pure and unswerving.”<sup>47</sup> The roots of symbolic color can be found across cultures. However, using color to label experience and a collective social movement relative to trauma is pointedly employed in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

Yellow ribbons signifying the welcoming home of prisoners is long-standing, although the origins are debated. In 1973 yellow ribbons were the subjects of the popular song “Tie a Yellow Ribbon Round the Ole Oak Tree” by Tony Orlando & Dawn. The yellow ribbon, and tying one around an oak tree, became an emblem and movement after articles about the Iran hostage crisis by Barbara Parker appeared in the *Washington Post* in December 1979. Parker tells the story of Penne Laingen, whose husband Bruce was a hostage: “Laingen, who has ‘tied a yellow ribbon round the old oak tree’ . . . suggests that as something else others might do.” The article concludes with Penne Laingen saying, “So I’m standing and waiting and praying . . . and one of these days Bruce is going to untie that yellow ribbon. It’s going to be out there until he does.”<sup>48</sup> The trauma of being held hostage and tortured is reduced to the pop song’s chorus, and, thus, commences the

42. Malo, “The Story of the Black Band-Aid.”

43. The phrase “the browning of America” refers to the demographic shift of whites being the majority in the US to people of color being the majority. Also see William H. Fry, *Diversity Explosion: How New Racial Demographics are Remaking America* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2014).

44. “Pantone SkinTone Guide: 110 Shades of Nude,” *Dexigner*, September 18, 2012, [www.dexigner.com/news/25617](http://www.dexigner.com/news/25617).

45. Ganesh Setty, “Crayola unveils new packs of crayons to reflect world’s skin tones,” CNN, May 22, 2020, [www.cnn.com/2020/05/22/us/crayola-skin-tone-crayons-trnd/index.html](http://www.cnn.com/2020/05/22/us/crayola-skin-tone-crayons-trnd/index.html).

46. Chauncey Alcorn, “Band-Aid will make black and brown flesh-toned bandages,” CNN Business, June 12, 2020, [www.cnn.com/2020/06/12/business/black-band-aids/index.html](http://www.cnn.com/2020/06/12/business/black-band-aids/index.html).

47. *The Suffragist*, Congressional Union for Woman Suffrage: Washington, DC, December 6, 1913.

48. Barbara Parker, “Penne Laingen’s Wait,” *The Washington Post*, December 10, 1979, [www.washingtonpost.com/archive/lifestyle/1979/12/10/penne-laingens-wait/8c08d59c-1ae3-4c44-80eb-8a1d1e23770f](http://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/lifestyle/1979/12/10/penne-laingens-wait/8c08d59c-1ae3-4c44-80eb-8a1d1e23770f).



IMAGE 10. Yellow ribbon on oak tree with *Tony Orlando & Dawn's Greatest Hits* (1975) album featuring the *Billboard* No. 1 song of 1973, “Tie a Yellow Ribbon Round the Ole Oak Tree”; illustration by Kathy Johnson Bowles.

modern era of colored ribbons’ association with trauma. Today, awareness ribbons and wristbands of all colors flood the contemporary conscience.

The reduction of trauma to colored fabric represents the voice of color in a world of capitalism. The promise of happiness and a return to normal life is a gesture to quell the survivor’s emotions, *not* the victim, for whom the gesture might be an unwelcomed emotional trigger and objectifying gesture. For survivors, “I am not what happened to me” is a mantra of mental health. Most people who have not experienced trauma wish to negate uncomfortable, emotionally difficult feelings associated with the pain of others. Therefore, awareness ribbons represent a toxic positivity and the commodification of trauma via color: red = AIDS, teal = PTSD and other psychological conditions, and pink = breast cancer.

The Susan G. Komen Foundation, known for its rallying cry concerning breast cancer, “race for the cure,” has come under scrutiny in recent years.<sup>49</sup> From the negligible

49. Paul Karon, “Does Komen Need a Cure of its Own?,” *Inside Philanthropy*, December 11, 2019, [www.insidephilanthropy.com/home/2019/12/11/does-komen-need-a-cure-of-its-own](http://www.insidephilanthropy.com/home/2019/12/11/does-komen-need-a-cure-of-its-own).

percentage of donations spent on cancer research, to the promotional merchandise (for example, pink ribbons and water bottles) manufactured using carcinogenic ingredients known to cause breast cancer, to branding litigation, some have questioned its altruism by labeling its capitalistic machinations as “pink washing.”<sup>50</sup>

Even in the realm of nonprofit moral superiority, the industrial complex is at work through the language of color. “Light Up Blue,” a campaign by the organization Autism Speaks, is widely considered by autistic people to be profoundly damaging and part of a eugenic logic.<sup>51</sup> The underlying message relating to the awareness campaign means the elimination of autism from the human race, and thus, the elimination of autistic people. For Autism Speaks, speaking means normalization—speaking as someone without autism or simply not existing at all.

The color of trauma perverts into a toxic positivity by turning the reality of trauma’s lived experience into wealth and happiness. For the color of trauma, fulfilling a promise to recognize the pain of the “other” and honoring a moral imperative of compassion and empathy in the face of suffering becomes impossible in capitalism. Color must embrace capitalism’s exceptionalism to participate in and benefit from it—everything is white-washed in the original sense of the word.<sup>52</sup> The disease of capitalism is purposefully covered up with a cruel unwillingness to acknowledge and confront the bloodiness in the “other’s” subjugation for the profit of another.

## CONCLUSION

The color of trauma has a genealogy, a family history of employment, cohabitation, marriage, divorce, birth, tragedy, catastrophe, illness, and death. It’s a complicated lineage, intertwined, influenced, and connected to others in time and space in unexpected ways. How it exists today represents the muscle memory of past experiences. And its future will be hauntings of the present. The color of trauma is experiential, not perceptual. It is of the body and the mind rather than the rods and cones of the eyes. The color of trauma feels, knows, and senses. Thus, it is connected to everything and embodies the pain and suffering of others with specificity and individuality.

Every aspect of contemporary life contains the color of trauma’s complex gene pool. Its genetic make up is not composed of one, five, twenty-four, or even 110 colors. It can be few or many as shapes shift and change form, from racial coding to disease and death to commerce. It encompasses the panoply of experience; it is not limited to conflict-laden

50. Chavie Lieber, “Breast cancer awareness products profit off survivors’ suffering,” *Vox*, October 17, 2018, [www.vox.com/the-goods/2018/10/17/17989624/pinkwashing-breast-cancer-awareness-products-profit](http://www.vox.com/the-goods/2018/10/17/17989624/pinkwashing-breast-cancer-awareness-products-profit). “Pink washing” can also refer to LGBTQ rights. See, for example, Sarah Schulman, “Israel and ‘Pinkwashing,’” *Opinion, New York Times*, November 22, 2011, [www.nytimes.com/2011/11/23/opinion/pinkwashing-and-israels-use-of-gays-as-a-messaging-tool.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2011/11/23/opinion/pinkwashing-and-israels-use-of-gays-as-a-messaging-tool.html).

51. Emily Willingham, “No Foolin’: Forget About Autism Awareness and Lighting Up Blue,” *Forbes*, April 1, 2017, [www.forbes.com/sites/emilywillingham/2017/04/01/no-foolin-forget-about-autism-awareness-and-lighting-up-blue/?sh=23cbe7a94aac](http://www.forbes.com/sites/emilywillingham/2017/04/01/no-foolin-forget-about-autism-awareness-and-lighting-up-blue/?sh=23cbe7a94aac).

52. “A New Meaning of ‘Whitewashing,’” *Merriam-Webster*, September 2019, [www.merriam-webster.com/words-at-play/whitewashing-words-were-watching](http://www.merriam-webster.com/words-at-play/whitewashing-words-were-watching).

## ESSAY

dualities like black or white, good or bad, male or female, survivor or victim, whole or damaged. The color of trauma is boundary-less. It exists not to serve or be served but to speak in a voice that opens up the possibilities of knowing the expansiveness of being (and not as a normalized hierarchy). The color of trauma isn't a finite assignment of identity. The color of trauma bends and shifts over time and space as it acts, thinks, and responds to others. ■

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