

**Vibrant Environments:  
The Feel of Color from the White Whale to the Red Wheelbarrow**

**Nicholas Gaskill**

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Approved by:

Jane F. Thrailkill (Director)

Robert Cantwell

Priscilla Wald

John McGowan

Gregory Flaxman

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## ABSTRACT

NICHOLAS GASKILL: Vibrant Environments: The Feel of Color from the White Whale  
to the Red Wheelbarrow  
(Under the direction of Jane F. Thrailkill)

In the closing decades of the nineteenth century, a host of color media technologies combined with new theories of embodied perception to alter both the types of color experiences commonly available and the general understanding of their significance. Synthetic colors brightened all manner of manufactured goods, from textiles and tin can labels to candy and oil paints, and these colored materials sparked a flurry of interest in the sensory and affective impact of cultural environments. This dissertation argues that the discourses and practices of modern color in the U.S. guided literary writers in experimenting with the effects of *textual* “environments” on readers and in demonstrating, through these investigations, the role of aesthetic experience in the extra-artistic realms of commerce, political reform, and education. At issue in each of these areas is the formation of individual subjects—and the groups they might create—through interactions with an arranged material environment. Color, more so than other sensory qualities, proved especially useful in tracking and intervening in these processes because it so readily slides among sensory, linguistic, and cultural domains, all functioning within a complex act of perception. I contend that late-nineteenth-century writers such as Hamlin Garland, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Stephen Crane, Charles Chesnutt, and L. Frank Baum—and later authors such as Nella Larsen and Claude

McKay—embraced color both as a model for literary practice (of how texts might affect readers) and as a technique for dramatizing the ways in which social identities emerge from a historical network of material and cultural practices. In the end, these two functions prove inseparable, and my account of how color launched literary realism into modernism doubles as an argument for the role of the aesthetic in our daily lives.

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## INTRODUCTION

### How to Get from a White Whale to a Red Wheelbarrow

Between Ishmael's meditation on the eerie whiteness of *Moby-Dick* (1851) and the brilliant red of William Carlos Williams's wheelbarrow (1923), synthetic dyes and vibrant color media radically altered the hues of everyday life. The effects were impossible to miss: by the 1890s, new colors made from coal-tar had brightened all manner of manufactured goods, from textiles and tin can labels to candy and oil paints, and these colored materials sparked a flurry of interest in the sensory and affective impact of cultural environments. In domestic interiors and on city streets, in psychology labs and Kindergarten classrooms, colors vivified the visual landscape, and this chromatic proliferation emerged from the developing networks of scientific research, industrial production, and aesthetic design that continue to engineer the sensory milieu of the twenty-first century. This dissertation argues that the discourses and practices of modern color in the U.S. guided literary writers in experimenting with the effects of *textual* environments on readers and in demonstrating, through these investigations, the role of aesthetic experience in the creation and contestation of individual selves. In this inquiry into the feeling of color, Melville's Ishmael leads the way. His meditation on the whiteness of the whale captures an incipient interest in the intensity of bright hues that is on full display in the glistening red of Williams's wheelbarrow, and the distance between

the Romantic novel and the modernist poem marks the cultural and literary spaces in which modern color developed. To orient the following study, then, let us begin with two of the most vivid hues in American literature.

“Colours spur us to philosophize”: Ludwig Wittgenstein’s assertion serves as a fitting epigraph for Ishmael’s attempts to wrestle the “ineffable” feeling of white into a “comprehensible form.”<sup>1</sup> In “The Whiteness of the Whale,” Ishmael tasks himself with conveying the “elusive something in the innermost idea of this hue” to his readers; he works to grasp the feeling of a color in thought, and in the process he encounters many of the chromatic qualities that fascinated later writers (*MD* 274). In particular, whiteness strikes Ishmael as an “intensifying agent,” something that acts on the human soul apart from learned associations and that lends a “nameless terror” to the scenes and objects on which it appears (*MD* 282, 276). The polar bear and the albatross provide exemplary cases: what but the addition of a milky hue could account for their unsettling visages? For Ishmael, then, “the thought of whiteness,” when “divorced from more kindly associations [. . .] and coupled with any object terrible in itself,” serves “to heighten” the emotions of an experience “to the furthest bounds,” and this amplifying effect infuses even our color terms (*MD* 274). At the “bare mention” of “the White Mountains,” Ishmael feels a “gigantic ghostliness” shroud his soul, but “the thought of Virginia’s Blue Ridge” fills him “full of a soft, dewy, distant dreaminess.” The different “imaginative impressions” spring from opposing color qualities; yet in both cases color acts as an independent element that regulates the affective tone of a situation (*MD* 278).

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<sup>1</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, ed. G. H. von Wright; trans. Peter Winch (Chicago, IL: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1980), 66. Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick; or The Whale* [1851] (New York: Modern Language Association, 2000), 272. Subsequent citations to *Moby-Dick* refer to this edition and will be cited parenthetically as *MD*.

Ishmael despairs of making his point clear. And indeed, his engagement with the non-associative and “nameless” effects of whiteness lead him to the limits of the empirical frameworks the guide his larger meditation. Not a thought, but a “vague, nameless horror” is his object in this chapter, and he insists that “this thing of whiteness” will not be apprehended by “the unimaginative mind” (*MD* 272, 277, 279). Only an observer sensitive to the feeling of color can articulate the ineffable aspects of experience that Ishmael pursues, and this sensitivity requires imagination more so than logic, intuition more than thought. In *Moby-Dick*, such attributes aim at unveiling an ideal realm apart from the shifting world of sensation, and thus, in the end, Ishmael folds his instinctual and visceral reaction to white into an empirical framework that dismisses colors altogether. He turns to the “theory of the natural philosophers,” elaborated by John Locke and George Berkeley, that conceives of colors as “secondary qualities” that attach themselves to a substance but do not constitute or even modify its essential identity. Ishmael invokes this philosophical mode when he considers the possibility that, unlike white, “all other earthly hues [. . .] are but subtile deceits, not actually inherent in substances, but only laid on from without” (*MD* 282-83). If the true color of light is white and all the colors of the world are but obstacles in the perception of the real, then the whiteness of the whale becomes an index of its symbolic connection to the ideal realm beyond the “pasteboard mask” of visible objects (*MD* 236).

When he turns to the natural philosophers, Ishmael veers from his earlier insights about the intensifying effects of color so as to find a satisfactory conclusion to his “dim, random” musings in the heights of the Romantic symbol. His characterization of white—as well as red, blue, and yellow—as a force able to be constellated with other objects in

the production of a new affective tone gives way to an approach that dismisses color as superfluous. Melville juxtaposes these two perspectives to demonstrate the difficulties attending the philosophical speculations to which color spurs us, and his narrator ultimately reveals the fate of color within empirical frameworks that set reason above and apart from sensation. Yet in the decades following the publication of *Moby-Dick*, chemists and psychologists developed a range of techniques to handle the slippery force of color, and their techniques followed Ishmael in treating individual hues as extractable forces that might be isolated, intensified, and reconstellated in perceptual encounters. By the time of Williams's *Spring and All* (1923), these ideas resonated with poetic techniques aimed at quickening vision and addressing the murky realm of feeling that Ishmael connects to color.

Indeed, Williams's "The Red Wheelbarrow" musters the elusive power of color with an ease unimaginable to Ishmael. Where Melville narrates an attempt to grasp color in thought, an attempt to get underneath the feeling of color, Williams puts color to work as an "intensifying agent" that attunes the reader to the present moment of perception. Poetry, he writes in *Spring and All*, seeks "[t]o refine, to clarify, to intensify that eternal moment in which we alone live," and "The Red Wheelbarrow" achieves this crystallization of experience by situating a simple sentence in a visual poetic form:

so much depends  
upon

a red wheel  
barrow

glazed with rain  
water

beside the white  
chickens<sup>2</sup>

Williams breaks down the individual elements of the image—"wheel/barrow," "rain/water"—and recomposes them in a poetic presentation that eschews "crude symbolism" and "strained associations" to foster a heightened "feeling of reality" (*CP* 189, 215). In the ensemble of the poem, the saturated tones made luminous by the glaze of rainwater intensify the image and make it shine; the red and the white gain their peculiar power not from any cultural associations but through an immediacy imagined to reside in colors as such. So much depends upon the redness of the wheelbarrow, then, because it is color that sensitizes readers to the moment of perception and thus achieves Williams's goal for poetry—"experience dynamized into reality" (*CP* 220). Like so many modernists, Williams reverses the formula of the natural philosophers: rather than gain the ideal by emptying the object world of its color, he conjures the real by pushing color to override its object.

The distance between Ishmael's foray into the nameless realm of color and Williams's composition in red and white frames the following investigation into the material, cultural, and literary histories of modern color in the United States. The whale's white invokes an empirical field in which colors elude thought and, as a consequence, are marginalized as deceitful overlays of the real world. The wheelbarrow's red marks an aesthetic that engages the sensory forces of color to quicken perception through the careful arrangement of a textual environment. One buttresses a symbol of reality; the other produces a feeling of the real. One shies away from color; the other revels in it. To track the passage from the whale to the wheelbarrow, we must

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<sup>2</sup> William Carlos Williams, *The Collected Poems of William Carlos Williams* (New York: New Directions, 1986), 178, 224. Hereafter cited as *CP*.

begin by surveying the proliferation of color discourses and technologies that enlivened the built environment and brought the feeling of color into the domain of literary practice.

### **The Mauve Decade**

In 1856, five years after Melville published *Moby-Dick*, British chemist William Perkin created mauve from oxidized aniline and so initiated a headlong search for synthetic dyestuffs that generated the material palettes of the modern world. From the black refuse of industry—the coal-tar from which aniline was extracted—organic chemists wrested a wide spectrum of hues more intense, durable, and affordable than those made from previous dyes and pigments. The first additions were entirely artificial molecular compounds that did not exist before their synthesis in the lab. But once the craze for mauve and magenta made dye-work the most lucrative branch of professional science, chemists set out to analyze the properties of existing dyestuffs in order to recreate them in a controlled setting. In 1868, for instance, German chemist Adolf Baeyer mapped the compound responsible for the red coloring of madder root, and by the early 1870s the synthetic version of the natural molecule, alizarin, outsold the raw material it copied and ruined the French market for the traditional red dye.<sup>3</sup> Within twenty-five years, every shade and tint that had previously been derived from the raw material of organic matter (insects, plants, animal parts) could be made to order in chemistry labs across Europe and America. Each new patent nudged the color trade

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<sup>3</sup> In *Colors: The Story of Dyes and Pigments* (Harry N. Abrams, Inc. Publishers, 2000), Francois Delamare and Bernard Guineau note the political consequences of Baeyer's discovery: "The success of German synthetic red and the collapse of the natural-red industry in France occurred in the aftermath of the Franco-Prussian War of 1870-71, and was therefore seen as a highly political event." Delamare and Guineau, *Colors*, 102. For a broader cultural history of red, in all of its various pigments, see Amy Butler Greenfield's *A Perfect Red: Empire, Espionage, and the Quest for the Color of Desire* (New York: HarperCollins, 2005).

away from its colonial past and into the future of industrial science. Indigo markets in India and the Caribbean collapsed once Baeyer found the formula of the relevant molecules, and the economic success of such discoveries prompted alliances among academic scientists and professional industrialists now housed in Research and Development divisions.<sup>4</sup> In addition to restructuring the social and economic networks through which color circulated, the production of aniline dyes erased the distinction between natural and synthetic materials, giving the raw matter of the earth an unworldly glow through the transformations of organic chemistry.<sup>5</sup>

Given the mix of social, material, and conceptual changes effected by the innovations in dye technology, it is no wonder that commentators in the 1890s christened their time “The Mauve Decade.”<sup>6</sup> Yet the visible results of mauve’s invention were not monotone but motley. In urban areas, bright signage and window displays beckoned pedestrians into a colorful world of consumption; in the home, chromolithographs and

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<sup>4</sup> For the demise of the indigo trade, see Delamare and Guineau, *Colors*, 105, 110; Philip Ball, *Bright Earth: Art and the Invention of Color* (Chicago, IL: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2001), 201-07; and Michael Taussig, *What Color is the Sacred?* (Chicago, IL: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2009), 141-59. For the emergence of the “academic-scientific-industrial complex that now dominates the global economy” out of the search for synthetic dyestuffs, see Andrew Pickering, “Decentering Sociology: Synthetic Dyes and Social Theory,” *Perspectives on Science* 13.3 (2005): 353-405.

<sup>5</sup> “Thanks to the chemical revolution wrought from coal,” writes anthropologist Michael Taussig, “we now live in an artificial world without much awareness as to its artificiality.” Taussig, *What Color is the Sacred?*, 44. See also chapter 28, “As Colors Pour from Tar.” In *Bright Earth*, a wide-ranging history of dyes, pigments, and the science of color, Philip Ball marks the advent of synthetic dyes as the “fulcrum of [his] story,” the turning-point at which the previous era of natural colors gives way to a world in which humans make the hues of art, molecule by molecule. See chapter 9, “A Passion for Purple: Dyes and the Industrialization of Color” for more on this history. Also helpful is Simon Garfield’s *Mauve: How One Man Invented a Color that Changed the World* (New York: Norton, 2001), which announces the wide-ranging effects of Perkin’s discovery even in its title. Ester Leslie tells this story from a slightly different angle; in *Synthetic Worlds: Nature, Art and the Chemical Industry* (London: Reaktion Books, 2005), she “tracks the confluence of technologies of industrial production, philosophies of science, politics and aesthetics” that motored the dye industry and explores “what happens to art and aesthetics when products of the natural world are remade synthetically by chemists.” Leslie, *Synthetic Worlds*, 11.

<sup>6</sup> Thomas Beer adopted this phrase for his book on the 1890s, *The Mauve Decade; American Life at the End of the Nineteenth Century* (New York: A. A. Knopf, 1926), but in all of his reflections on the social scenes and cultural atmospheres at the end of the century he fails to consider the full import of his title.



vividly hued wallpapers brought the rich palettes of upper-class interiors into middle-class life;<sup>7</sup> and in the schoolroom, crayons and construction paper enlivened the activities of teachers and students. Billboards, posters, and advertising cards papered the new hues across the cityscape by day, and electric signs shone with multi-colored flashes by night. Textiles, building materials, and even foodstuffs took on a brighter glow, and the color section of the Sears Catalog (first added in 1897) brought multi-hued images of these multi-colored goods to homes all along the transcontinental railroad. In 1896, William Randolph Hearst's *New York Journal* announced the addition of its comic supplement, the first newspaper pages to come in color, with an enthusiasm characteristic of the age: "Eight Pages of Polychromatic Effulgence That Makes the Rainbow Look Like a Lead Pipe!"<sup>8</sup> To be sure, previous eras had been attuned to the uses of color, but the proliferation of color media and print technologies enabled by synthetic dyes coupled with the industrial modes of production and networks of distribution developed after the Civil War to create an unprecedented interest in the uses and effects of vivid hues.

The range of color innovations at the end of the nineteenth century did not simply endow the existing visual environment with brighter tones; they also provided the sensory constituents of a new economic order and shifted the materials through which individual

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<sup>7</sup> The two definitive works on the history of chromolithography and color printing in nineteenth-century America are Peter C. Marzio's *The Democratic Art, Chromolithography 1840-1900: Pictures for a 19<sup>th</sup>-Century America* (Boston, MA: D. R. Godine and Amon Carter Museum of Western Art, Fort Worth, 1979) and Jay T. Last's *The Color Explosion: Nineteenth-Century American Lithography* (Santa Ana, CA: Hillcrest Press, 2005).

<sup>8</sup> Qtd. in Taussig, *What Color is the Sacred?*, 22. The star of Hearst's color-pages was R. F. Outcault's popular comic strip, "The Yellow Kid," which later moved to Joseph Pulitzer's *New York World*. When the *New York Press* editor Erwin Wardman coined the now famous phrase to describe the sensationalist journalistic practices of these two papers, he initially offered "yellow-kid journalism," a reference to Outcault's series. For a history of the comic strip and an analysis of its cultural significance, see Mary Wood's scholarly website, "The Yellow Kid on the Paper Stage: Acting Out Class Tensions and Racial Divisions in the New Urban Environment": <http://xroads.virginia.edu/~MA04/wood/ykid/yellowkid2.htm>. Accessed 9 June 2010.

selves were formulated and expressed. To do so, these technologies had to be taken up and put to work by the many discourses and practices of color that developed at the turn of the century, including those articulated in interior design manuals, advertising trade journals, spiritualist color theory, and philosophical treatises. Almost all of these areas drew on psychological studies that emphasized the powerful yet subtle effects that various colors have on minds and bodies. Many of the tenets of these discourses seem commonplace to us now—for instance, that a fiery red wallpaper sets a different “mood” than a cool blue one—but they only emerged once psychologists, against the tradition of Ishmael’s natural philosophers, made color a central site for investigating the sensory and affective qualities of our perceptual interactions with environments. Modern color may have sprung from the chemistry lab, but it acquired its perceived physiological power from psychological research; as art historian John Gage reports, by the 1890s “[c]olour was [. . .] largely a concern of psychology.”<sup>9</sup> Studies by Gustav T. Fechner and experiments conducted in the laboratory of Wilhelm Wundt explored the sensory and affective response of the human organism to colors and postulated a non-associative theory of chromatic effects that gave empirical weight to Ishmael’s vague intuitions (*CM* 192). Rather than emphasize red’s symbolic link to passion or love, these studies considered red’s ability to raise a pulse or to agitate the nervous system. Admen and marketers, alongside painters and philosophers, took up these findings with enthusiasm, experimenting with ability of bright hues to stir emotional and sensory responses. As German critic Karl Scheffler remarked in 1901, “never before was the sense of colour such a matter of nerves” (qtd. in *CM* 192).

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<sup>9</sup> John Gage, *Color and Meaning: Art, Science, and Symbolism* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1999), 191. Hereafter cited parenthetically as *CM*.

The transatlantic scientific community worked with tools and materials produced by industry—such as color swatches and lamps—to generate theories of color experience that, in turn, influenced the production and application of vivid hues in the commercial context. Psychology’s decisive role in this circuit was to provide empirical evidence for an understanding of color as “a question of immediate feeling rather than of intellectual judgment” (CM 192). As it had for centuries past, color was said to hold an intimate relation to the body and emotions, but rather than mark it as inferior to the rational properties of line and form, these affiliations now endowed it with a power to unsettle thought and reveal the qualities of sensory life.<sup>10</sup> This revaluation of color followed from a broader shift in the understanding of vision that lodged perception within the human body. As Jonathan Crary explains in *Techniques of the Observer* (1990), the “eighteenth-century observer confronts a space of order, unmodified by his or her own sensory or physiological apparatus.”<sup>11</sup> Such a perceiver informed scientific and philosophical

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<sup>10</sup> The most prominent art historical context for such ideas is known as the “*disegno* versus *colore*” debate. In short, treatments of painting stretching from classical antiquity through the Renaissance and into the eighteenth century argued that line and form alone were necessary for creating a satisfying artistic representation and that color provided only an extraneous and often distracting element. To bolster such arguments, line was associated with reason and masculinity, while color was linked to emotion and femininity. For the basics of this debate, see chapter seven in John Gage, *Color and Culture: Practice and Meaning from Antiquity to Abstraction* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1993); for an extended meditation on the negative connotations of color, see David Batchelor, *Chromophobia* (London: Reaktion Books, 2000).

In *The Eloquence of Color: Rhetoric and Painting in the French Classical Age*, trans. Emily McVarish (Berkeley, CA: Univ. of California Press, 1993), Jacqueline Lichtenstein situates the arguments about drawing and painting—lines and colors—within the development of Platonic philosophy in opposition to sophistry and rhetoric. Her impressive study follows how a version of truth developed in metaphysics was transferred into an incompatible realm of visual art, where it became a “problem.” Her notion of color as anti-Platonism in painting resonates with Giles Deleuze’s treatment of color in the work of Francis Bacon as a force that deranges thought and with Charles A. Riley II’s account of color’s capacity to unsettle codes and systems. Giles Deleuze, *Francis Bacon*, trans. Daniel W. Smith (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 2003), Charles A. Riley II, *Color Codes: Modern Theories of Color in Philosophy, Painting and Architecture, Literature, Music, and Psychology* (Hanover: Univ. Press of New England, 1995).

<sup>11</sup> Jonathan Crary, *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1990), 55.

inquiries into the nature of vision and human knowledge during the Enlightenment. But in the nineteenth century, beginning in part with Goethe's *Theory of Colors* (1810), the hard distinctions between interior and exterior which characterized Newtonian and Cartesian endeavors gave way to an understanding of vision as an admixture of elements of the observer's body and information from the world. Colors had everything to do with this shift. Goethe and other investigators drew inspiration from "physiological" colors—those visual sensations produced when pressure is applied to the eye—and formed theories of how the organs of vision assemble sense data in ways bound by physiology. Color perception allowed psychologists and philosophers to think through the ways in which the act of vision emerges from the dynamic interaction between an embodied observer and an evolving environment.

Empirical accounts of sensory life and the complex ingredients assembled in perception soon attracted practitioners of that older science of the sensible, aesthetics. Indeed, under the increased interest in the aspects of our embodied experience that elude conceptual categories, art assumed the task of investigating and experimenting with our felt encounters with the material world. Art, in other words, became an empirical endeavor. William James offers a characteristic formulation of this idea in *The Principles of Psychology* (1890) when attempting to convey the shifting character of sensory life: "The grass out of the window now looks to me of the same green in the sun as in the shade," he explains, "and yet a painter would have to paint one part of it dark brown, another part bright yellow, to give its real sensational effect."<sup>12</sup> For James, and many other late-nineteenth-century thinkers, the artist sees the world in its sensory immediacy, apart from the crust of habit—and the sign of this openness is the color on

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<sup>12</sup> William James, *The Principles of Psychology*, vol. 1 [1890] (New York: Cosimo, 2007), 284.

the canvas. Art reveals the details of our perceptual experience obscured by daily routine, and, as such, aesthetic experience marks a specific quality of organism-environment interactions. By this model, the goal of art is not representation—as if one could stand apart from the flow of experience—but rather the intensification and enlivening of perception, as illustrated by the glistening red of Williams’s wheelbarrow.

From this mix of psychological theories and color media, writers forged literary styles aimed at stimulation rather than simulation; they engaged the proliferation of colorful environments to gather ideas and techniques for their fiction. Yet despite the palpable and pervasive changes wrought by the profusion of color, critics of the literary and visual culture of the late nineteenth century have focused overwhelmingly on the grayscale images of photography, and as a result, they have cast the period as one fixated on questions of objective representation and verisimilitude. Such long-accepted notions lose their purchase when the historical archive expands to include the wider field of color innovations and the literary techniques they provoked: in their chromatic experiments, writers such as Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Hamlin Garland, and Stephen Crane did not seek to capture a snapshot of reality so much as to produce a *feeling* of the real. That is, they crafted styles and techniques directed at stirring a sensory and affective response in their readers, and their “realism” inheres in their use of the non-representational aspects of language (the stock and trade of later modernist avant-gardes) to address the inchoate, emotional qualities that pervade conscious life. For these authors, the movements between such affective experiences and their conceptual framing—the way we feel and the ways we make sense of those feelings—mark the grounds on which individual identities are constituted and contested, and they presented literary language as the

discourse best suited to presenting and addressing the palpable yet inarticulate affects of a historical moment.

### **Color Scheme**

The interlocking developments in organic chemistry, experimental psychology, and commercial design sketched above produced the vibrant environments of the modern United States. Vibrant not only in the sense of colorful—though they were certainly that—but also in their ability to thrill, to agitate, to disrupt observers at the level of their feeling bodies. The vibrating light waves that connected the eye and the environment in color perception prompted broader vibrations, resonances between individuals and their surroundings that emphasized their entanglement. Color caused a commotion, and its ability to excite was given social significance in the range of discourses and practices through which modern hues developed. Turn-of-the-century discussions of color, then, superseded the visible effects of synthetic dyes to encompass a range of concerns about the bodily and often unconscious ways in which we engage our surroundings. To capture the full impact of these chromatic innovations, this dissertation analyzes the ways in which novelists narrated the complexities of color experience as it unfolded in a rapidly changing social and material world.

Each of the writers in my study engages a particular discourse of modern color to dramatize the dynamic interactions between embodied individuals and their cultural environments, and each of them fashions a set of literary techniques to address the affective aspects of these exchanges. Far from using color as a mere descriptor, late-nineteenth-century writers such as Hamlin Garland, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Stephen

Crane, and L. Frank Baum—and later authors such as Nella Larsen and Claude McKay—embraced color experience both as a model for literary technique (of how texts might affect readers) and as a site for investigating the ways in which social identities emerge from a historical network of material and cultural practices. Color, for these writers, stands at the center of literary and social projects, not as a symbol or as a signifying code but as an index of perceptual effects. Their textual hues thus require a more historical and nuanced approach than the colors of literature have yet to receive. Rather than treat color as a stand-in for something else, I analyze it through the historical network of material, conceptual, and social arrangements through which it appeared.<sup>13</sup> And rather than draw analogies between literary descriptions and visual representations, I follow the ways in which writers engaged a vivid perceptual landscape to draw energies and ideas for fiction.<sup>14</sup>

The shared pursuit of color assumed various forms in these writers, and in five chapters I examine the overlapping and yet distinct inquiries conducted by turn-of-the-

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<sup>13</sup> Sigmund Skard's compendious survey of scholarly attention to literary colors up to World War II tallies the many maps of literary color symbolism and situates them in terms of Romantic mysticism, religious ritual, and early-twentieth-century depth psychology. Sigmund Skard, *The Use of Color in Literature: A Survey of Research* (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1946), 177-79, 187-94. Certainly the project of establishing specific cultural contexts in which colors come to mean contributes to our understanding of the history of colors, but in the case of turn-of-the-century fiction color entered literature not through its symbolic potential but through its non-associative force.

Charles A. Riley's work on literature in *Color Codes* invokes this non-associative approach when he explains that for "the greatest of literary colorists, [. . .] color is an element, not just a way of coding the map." Charles A. Riley II, *Color Codes: Modern Theories of Color in Philosophy, Painting and Architecture, Literature, Music, and Psychology* (Hanover: Univ. Press of New England, 1995), 222. Yet his quick treatment of nine modernist and postmodernist writers in fifty pages provides hardly a glimpse of what a sustained attention to the use of color in a literary style might look like.

<sup>14</sup> Studies that seek out parallels between literature and the visual arts content themselves with accounts of how the color images of novels and poems are "like" the canvases of certain painters, most often painters working in France from 1880 to 1930. Color in the work of Stephen Crane, in particular, has been treated according to its affinities with impressionism, and thus I engage this mode of reading literary colors most directly in Chapter Three.

Bruce R. Smith's *The Key of Green: Passion and Perception in Renaissance Culture* (Chicago, IL: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2009) offers a happy exception to these conventional ways of reading colors.

century and modernist authors. Taken in sequence, the chapters chart a trajectory through which color becomes detached from individual objects, intensified, and then resituated within new aesthetic environments. Such is the movement of color in the realms of organic chemistry and experimental psychology—where color compounds are extracted from raw materials or color perceptions are isolated from the tangle of experience—and by tracing it through the literature I provide a reformulation of the “liberation of color” associated with modernist aesthetics. In particular, I begin with the nuanced and shifting color perceptions of the natural landscape rendered in Garland’s short stories and then move through a series of increasingly engineered spaces: the domestic interiors in Gilman’s work, the colorful barrage of the urban environment in Crane, and the monochromatic fantasy worlds of *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* (1900), analogues to the brightly-hued window displays Baum advocates in his commercial writing. These four chapters all concentrate on literary works and cultural discourses of the 1890s, and this tight historical focus allows me to illustrate the uneven emergence of related trends and tendencies without squeezing them into a lock-step historical progression. The fifth chapter looks ahead to the late 1920s, another era marked by rapid color innovation, to explore the social and material environments that emerged from the colorful practices treated in the preceding chapters.

Like a series of individual colors, then, these chapters combine to complement one another, to form harmonies, and occasionally to clash. They approach shared ideas from different angles: for instance, the concept of “pure perception” appears as artistic (chapter 1), insane (chapter 2), childlike (chapter 4), and primitive (chapter 5), but in each case it is a state both accessed and manifested through vivid colors. Later chapters seek



to clarify the undercurrents of earlier chapters as much as the initial essays lay the groundwork for those that follow. Thus, while the affiliation of modern colors and “primitive” energies shapes my analysis of Gilman’s fiction and the brightly-hued collaborations of Baum and his illustrator W. W. Denslow, I do not offer an in-depth treatment of this relation until the final chapter, in which Nella Larsen and Claude McKay enable a more nuanced account of the savage images that contribute to the feeling of color. Likewise, the treatment of urban experience introduced in the discussion of Crane is carried into the investigations of the fourth and fifth chapters, and the brief comments on Whistler and Matisse in chapters two and four build on the more detailed account of modern painting provided in the essay on Garland and Impressionism. With the exception of the second chapter, each of the following analyses also explore the conjunctions between literary figures and pragmatist philosophers, including William James (chapter 1), Charles S. Peirce (chapter 3), and John Dewey (chapters 4 and 5). As a mode of thought committed to situating intellectual life within the growing, feeling body, pragmatism provides a philosophical framework well-suited to grasping the realms of sensory and perceptual life explored through literary color.

Chapter One demonstrates the changing understandings of artistic vision that situated aesthetic production at the intersection of an embodied artist and a shifting sensory landscape. In the mid- to late-nineteenth-century, the assumptions that undergirded the picturesque mode of painting—namely that the artist stood apart from the scene and modified it according to traditional conventions—gave way to the tenets that drove the experiments of Impressionism. For Claude Monet and Pierre-Auguste Renoir in France and John Enneking and Childe Hassam in America, art conveyed an intense

and immediate perception of an environment, a slice of the world as it hits the human eye. Under this artistic dispensation, one indebted to evolutionary biology and physiological optics, color assumed a privileged status as the perceptual element that best indexes the relational interactions that produce visual experience. Garland, a regionalist writer and early proponent of Impressionism, wrote extensively about the artistic innovations ushered in by evolutionary thought, and he championed color experience as a model for artistic receptivity. For Garland, color reveals the extent to which all art must be local art, for all art emerges from the felt impression of a local environment, and these impressions are best rendered through color. Color localizes art. Thus, in his short stories, he dramatizes the shifting impressions of the Midwestern landscape through a play of colors that draws together the observer and the observed in a single mix of color. These scenes provide the framework for his larger fictional project: in *Main-Travelled Roads* (1891) and other works of the 1890s, Garland presents a sensitivity to color impressions as a means to open himself and his readers onto the more complex social atmospheres of Midwestern farming communities and their relation to urban centers.

Gilman too dramatizes the flow of chromatic experience to investigate the material milieu of vision; in particular, she presents the frenetic color perceptions of housewives—memorably dramatized in “The Yellow Wall-Paper” (1892) and treated throughout her sociological and literary work—to index the “savage” conditions of domestic labor and the “androcentric” culture that sustains them. My second chapter situates the tropes and techniques of this critique within Gilman’s design school training and reveals the importance of “mood” in her aesthetic and political projects. In the late-nineteenth-century, home decorators characterized color as a palpable and pervasive

force that establishes the atmosphere of an interior; where designs and patterns stimulate the intellect, colors act on the body. Gilman adopts this understanding of color to develop a literary aesthetic attentive to our subtle sensory engagements with an environment. She experiments with tone, the affective quality of a literary experience, to create stories that bring the potent yet unnoticed conditions of the home onto the level of thought, thus making them available for reform.

Gilman and Garland each fashion their language on the model of color perception to address the felt experience of domestic and regional environments; Crane, on the other hand, cares little for the nuances of visual experience. The bold blocks of primary hues that distinguish his fiction do not attempt to capture the contours of lived perception so much as they harness the feeling of color for use in his literary project. Chapter Three considers the material and philosophical contexts of these experiments with textual color. Against the tradition of reading Crane as an impressionist, I argue that he developed his style through an engagement with the intensified colors of Art Nouveau—not by reproducing them but by transferring the energies of art posters and the newly colorful urban environment into his writing. His efforts to isolate the effects of color from its actual instantiations in objects aligns him both with the chemical processes that produced synthetic dyes and with philosophical debates about *qualia*, understood as the feeling of what it is like to have particular sensations (of seeing blue, of smelling a rose, of hearing a trumpet). Through an analysis of *The Red Badge of Courage* (1895) and a cluster of short stories from the 1890s, I contend that *qualia* offered Crane a model for how color words might activate a feeling of chromatic sensation using only the black marks of print on a white page.

The flat blocks of vivid color that characterize Crane's writing also appear in L. Frank Baum's *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*, but with an important twist: Baum's descriptions of Oz's monochromatic regions appeared alongside W. W. Denslow's vibrant color illustrations, the first of their kind to appear in a children's book. *Oz* stands apart from the other texts I discuss in that it is the only book to put color words alongside colored ink, and in this way it brings together the concerns with material and discursive chromatic environments that occupied the previous three chapters. Moreover, the juxtaposition of Baum's words and Denslow's images place *Oz* at the intersection of two turn-of-the-century discourses interested in the interplay of language and bright colors: color education and commercial display. In the classroom, educators such as Milton Bradley advocated a standardized program of color training aimed at initiating children into the ranks of manufacturers; key to these pedagogical endeavors was the development of a scientific color nomenclature that could guide them in the perception of subtle hues. Meanwhile, in show windows and print advertisements, admen such as Baum and artists such as Denslow attempted to activate the child-eye latent in adult consumers in order to endow goods with a sensory allure. *Oz* assembles elements from each of these areas to craft a book rooted in turn-of-the-century formulations of the "child's view of color," an absorbed mode of engagement mobilized for educational, aesthetic, and commercial projects. In his writings on children's books and the color spectacles of commodity capitalism, Walter Benjamin suggests the deep affinities among *Oz*'s many parts, and thus I conclude the chapter by presenting Benjamin as both the inheritor and interpreter of nineteenth-century understandings of a child-like love of color.

By the 1920s, the color-saturated worlds engineered by decorators, advertisers, and designers had gained a wider reach through the invention of neon signs, colored plastics, and synthetic lacquers. Saturated colors insinuated themselves into everyday life in the form of clothing, cars, and household appliances, and the rise of the fashion industry prompted an even greater array of color choices, pitched to shoppers as opportunities to distinguish themselves through consumption. More so than ever before, colored matter comprised the material stuff of social life. My fifth and final chapter analyzes a group of writers particularly attuned to the problems and possibilities surrounding the use of modern colors in the performance of identity: the authors of the Harlem Renaissance. I argue that writers such as Nella Larsen and Claude McKay embraced the dizzying landscape of cabaret lights, cosmetics, and vivid clothing to fashion modern ways of embodying race. They tapped into the sensory rush released by modern hues to present a love of color—long-associated with dark-skinned peoples—as part of an urban, bohemian, and artistic sensibility. Of course, these performances were precarious; as Larsen’s *Quicksand* (1928) makes clear, an embrace of “primitivism” always ran the risk of feeding into the stereotypes of white audiences. And yet these threats did not stop writers from experimenting, and the energetic portrayals of modern black life in McKay’s *Home to Harlem* (1928) created affirmative figurations of “savage” life that influenced broader formulations of modern aesthetics.

Together, these chapters challenge critics to approach turn-of-the-century U.S. literature, visual culture, and identity formation with fresh eyes. By revealing a culture fascinated by the intense sensation of bright hues and eager to experiment with their effects, I correct the “colorblindness” that studies of photography have imposed on

literary history and, in so doing, disclose a host of cultural and aesthetic debates about the affective influence of our environments. The significance of these debates stretches beyond that of the visual landscape to address the mix of anxiety and excitement that accompanied recognitions of the human organism's radical openness to its surroundings. As such, they established the embodied and emotional character of experience as essential components in the formation and deformation of social identities, and they mark aesthetic practices as particularly qualified to dramatize these processes and intervene in their construction.

## CHAPTER ONE

### A Natural History of Local Color:

#### Hamlin Garland and the Evolution of Regionalism

Local color didn't always mean local culture. Before the late nineteenth century, the phrase belonged to the visual arts and referred to the "natural and proper" hue of an object considered apart from distorting influences (atmospheric light, reflected colors from nearby objects, the subjective disposition of the observer). It was, as a mid-nineteenth-century painting manual explained, "the self colour of an object." This art historical definition of local color, dominant for over a century and half, fell out of favor in the 1880s, when the phrase instead came to denote the unique characteristics or manners of a particular region.<sup>1</sup> Once a property of objects, local color became an affair of cultures, and this semantic shift occasioned a concomitant migration of its aesthetic domain from painting to literature. Identity—"self colour"—was still at issue, but by the 1890s the bearers of that identity were rural subjects, not artistic objects. How did the writer, rather than the painter, emerge as the true observer of local color?

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<sup>1</sup> The *Oxford English Dictionary* marks the first usage of "local colours" in 1721, where the phrase, given in the plural, denotes the hues that are "natural and proper for each particular Object in a Picture." The art manual cited from the following century, *Painting Properly Explained* (1859) by Thomas J. Gullick and John Timbs, is also quoted in the *OED* entry. Stray instances of the cultural definition of local color occur before the 1880s, often in reference to the novels of the Brontë sisters, but the overwhelming majority of occurrences appear in art circles and discussions of painting. The *OED* cites an 1884 issue of the *Saturday Review* as the first example of the modern—or metaphorical—sense of the phrase, here used with regards to the Irish.

To answer this question, we must examine the scientific and aesthetic innovations that fundamentally altered the character of modern artistic vision and, in the process, rendered the idea of “natural and proper” colors untenable. Local color in painting instituted a hard distinction between an object’s real, substantive properties and the ephemeral, deceptive qualities imposed on it by its surroundings. True colors, by this model, are those abstracted from their environmental conditions and observed by an artist who stands apart from the scene, transcribing them without altering their tones.<sup>2</sup> Both the colors and the observer are self-contained, unrelated. In the mid-to-late-nineteenth century, however, these assumptions were widely challenged by practical and theoretical work in optics that insisted that colors *always* depend on their relation to other colors for their particular quality and that the physical properties of the eye and brain are *integral* to the perception of visual objects. Individual hues and even individual observers were no longer thought of as self-sufficient entities; rather, they appeared as elements of an ongoing, relational process of perception, a drama of dancing light playing upon the retina. Enter the impressionists. Painters such as Monet and Renoir in France and John Joseph Enneking and Childe Hassam in America developed their entire aesthetic

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<sup>2</sup> In this way, the notion of local color developed in the eighteenth century constitutes an effort to rescue color from its “secondary” status under the philosophical empiricism of John Locke and his followers. However, this attempt merely shuffles the terms while keeping the framework of primary and secondary—real and illusory, substantive and transitory—in place. It is not until the late-nineteenth-century revisions of empiricism, most notably by William James, that color’s fundamental relationality would cease to be an embarrassment to scientists, philosophers, and artists and became a model by which to comprehend an evolving and “pluralistic” universe.

Current art dictionaries continue to include entries for local color, and some of them, such as *The HarperCollins Dictionary of Art Terms and Techniques* (1991), rely on the same distinctions embedded in the eighteenth-century usage: local color, according to *HarperCollins*, denotes “the true color of an object in ordinary daylight, as distinguished from its apparent color when influenced by unusual lighting, abnormal conditions, reflected color, and the like. Also, the normal color of a thing, as distinguished from its rendition in an anomalous coloration that is merely the predilection of the artist.” Other dictionaries, such as *The McGraw-Hill Dictionary of Art* (1969), display more skepticism about the empirical validity of the phrase by qualifying “true” color with scare-quotes and prefacing the definition with the telling adverb, “Theoretically.”



technique in opposition to the premises of local color, and the general rebellion grew to encompass even traditional painters such as Burleigh Parkhurst. In a section of *Sketching from Nature* reprinted in an 1890 issue of *The Art Amateur*, Parkhurst proclaims, “there is no such thing as ‘local color’”: “Objects change continually with every change of atmospheric condition and every change of position of the sun,” and thus “for the painter an object has no color of its own, but only such color as the varying conditions of things may for the moment give to it.”<sup>3</sup> In place of the stable hues of a separate reality, the artist now registers the play of atmospheric light and records the perceptual impressions that run counter to the common sense that underwrites local colors.

Stripped of perceptual significance, local color slid into the realm of culture, where it designated the singular character of a region’s landscape, folkways, and people considered apart from their place within the growing world-system. The painter’s remove from the perceived object was transposed onto the distance between the touristic observer and the local inhabitant, and the unified “self colors” of painting came to mark the coherent life-worlds of “other” cultures, the unique objects of study in the burgeoning field of cultural anthropology.<sup>4</sup> Such complex entities outstripped the medium of the visual arts and attracted the efforts of literary writers, whose linguistic medium provided the most advanced technology for integrating the sights, sounds, and social relations of a particular area available at the time. To be sure, this writing occurred within the context of an increasingly interconnected nation, but the regions of local color were treated as

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<sup>3</sup> Parkhurst, Daniel Burleigh. “Sketching from Nature.” *The Art Amateur: A Monthly Journal Devoted to Art in the Household* 23.2 (July 1890), 30.

<sup>4</sup> For the best treatments of regionalism and local color in the contexts of middle-class tourism and ethnographical writing, see, respectively, Richard Brodhead’s *Cultures of Letters: Scenes of Reading and Writing in Nineteenth Century America* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1993) and Michael A. Elliott’s *The Culture Concept: Writing and Difference in the Age of Realism* (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 2002).

idylls apart from modernity rather than as the result of the transportation and communication networks that knit the national interior to its seaboard cities or as products of the economic markets that encouraged these relations.<sup>5</sup> While visual artists were abandoning the individual essences of local color, writers assumed the project of capturing and communicating the unique qualities of particular regions. And though literary critics have disagreed over the ideological import of these depictions—some claiming them as “complicit” or “exploitative”; others insisting on the “subversive” nature of sketches written by female and minority authors—no one has questioned the assumption that local color and regionalist texts deal with isolated, individual communities, usually seen from the vantage point of the non-native. No one, that is, has challenged the modes of vision and the objects of observation thought to define the regionalist narrative.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Amy Kaplan’s essay on “Nation, Region, Empire” in the *Columbia History of the American Novel*, ed. by Emory Elliott (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1991) offers the most forceful reading of regionalism as an attempt to expand the boundaries of the nation’s imagined community; however, as I will argue, her interpretation falters when she turns to Hamlin Garland. In *Regional Fictions: Culture and Identity in Nineteenth-Century American Literature* (Madison, WI: Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 2001), Stephanie Foote presents a thorough-going treatment of regionalism in terms of both the literary and non-literary marketplaces that linked resource-heavy rural areas to urban economic centers. Tom Lutz’s *Cosmopolitan Vistas: American Regionalism and Literary Value* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell Univ. Press, 2004) also situates its treatment of local color within the emergence of what we would now call globalization, but rather than ground his analysis in imperialism (like Kaplan) or economics (like Foote), he emphasizes the attitudes and virtues of the cosmopolitan that arose within these contexts.

<sup>6</sup> Without a doubt, the most triumphant critics of regionalism and local color are Judith Fetterley and Marjorie Pryse. For them, the two terms denote very different kinds of writing, divided according to their relation to hegemonic norms and values (which, it turns out, can be easily parsed according to the identity position of the author: “We began to observe,” they explain in their Norton anthology of *American Women Regionalists, 1850-1910*, “that white men did not write the same kinds of regional texts that some white women or some members of minority groups did” [xi]) (New York: Norton, 1992). In *Writing Out of Place: Regionalism, Women, and American Literary Culture* (Urbana, IL: Univ. of Illinois Press, 2003), they make a clear-cut distinction between the two modes: “literary regionalism uncovers the ideology of local color and reintroduces an awareness of ideology into discussions of regionalist politics” (6). The ideological and counter-ideological techniques are elsewhere specified in terms of the position of the observer: local-color writers “hold up regional characters to potential ridicule by eastern urban readers” while regionalist authors “present regional experiences from within, so as to engage the reader’s sympathy and identification” (AWR xii). Yet in both cases, the object of local color or regionalist writing is taken to be the distinct experiences or culture of a particular people.

But consider the case of Hamlin Garland. As both an early defender of Impressionism in America and a staunch advocate for regionalist fiction, he was poised between the decline of local color in painting and its rise in the literary arts. In his critical writing of the 1890s, he embraced the label “local color” more energetically than any of his contemporaries, and yet his pleas for regional particularity invoke the shifting world of perceptual relations that occupied modern art over and against the static realm of color-essences that persisted, albeit in modified form, in other regionalist texts. Garland’s brand of local color, then, brought the insights of painting to bear on an emerging literary mode, and in order to grasp the full ambition of his critical and artistic project—to understand the import of his “veritism”—we must situate his prose alongside the transformations in artistic vision that erased local color from visual art. The aforementioned studies in physiological optics, along with related work in evolutionary biology and experimental psychology, lodged perception in the evolved human body and turned the painter’s eye from an abstracting mechanism, something that locates an essence, to a constructive tool that shapes the visual world it presents. Within this artistic dispensation, color perceptions indexed the momentary clash of an embodied organism with a sensory environment, and it is precisely here, at the chromatic intersection of the artistic eye and a particular region, that Garland finds his local colors. His goal, like that of Herbert Spencer, Eugène Véron, and a number of other scientists and philosophers of the day, was nothing less than the reconstruction of aesthetics from the perspective of evolution, and he pursued this ambition through the capture and communication of embodied color perceptions.

Each time Garland spoke of his literary method, he invoked an act of embodied vision. His “veritism” differs from realism in that it recognizes the physiological limits of artistic perception: “The veritist does *not* ‘write of things as they are,’” Garland explains, “but *of* things as he *sees* them: which is the whole width of art and the world from the position ascribed to him.”<sup>7</sup> Positioned and embedded in a locale, the veritist feels his environment and translates those impressions into art. Critics have of course recognized Garland’s engagements with the innovations of modern painting, but these readings merely point to Impressionism as a source for particular qualities of Garland’s color descriptions: bright, fleeting, cognizant of certain properties of chromatic reflection, and so on.<sup>8</sup> Certainly such moments of “painterly” vision appear in Garland’s work, but in the stories of *Main-Travelled Roads* (1891), his landscape sketches, and the critical essays in *Crumbling Idols* (1894), Garland engages color primarily as a way to dramatize the transactions among organisms and environments that constitute the domain of aesthetic experience. And though he begins with color as such, he appropriates the metaphorical translations the term undergoes in literary “local color” to expand the artistic impression to encompass the complex networks of natural and social environments assembled in particular regions. This expansion retains two of the primary lessons Garland learned from impressionist color: the role of *selection* in perception and the process of *verification* required to translate individual experiences to a wider

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<sup>7</sup> Qtd. in Keith Newlin, *Hamlin Garland: A Life* (Lincoln, NE: Univ. of Nebraska P, 2003), 180, emphasis in original.

<sup>8</sup> See chapter eight of Donald Pizer’s *Hamlin Garland’s Early Work and Career* (Berkeley, CA: Univ. of California Press, 1960), a fine work of scholarship and criticism that remains the starting point for those interested in Garland’s influences, and James B. Stronks’s “A Realist Experiments with Impressionism: Hamlin Garland’s ‘Chicago Studies’” (*American Literature* 36.1 [March 1964]: 38-52). Keith Newlin’s biography also treats Garland’s encounter with Impressionism; see chapter eleven. Further citations to Pizer’s *Hamlin Garland’s Early Work and Career* will appear parenthetically as *EWC*.

community. In this way, Garland's colors, and his readings in physiological aesthetics, bring him into contact with the psychology and pragmatism of William James, whose theory of truth as verification illuminates veritism as a species of radical empiricism rather than as the crude form of relativism Garland's critics have so often taken it as. Once approached as a participant in and product of late-nineteenth-century efforts to develop a more empirical aesthetic and a more aesthetic empiricism, the project of local color writing, in Garland and subsequent authors, generates accounts of identity and region reminiscent of modern hues: singular yet relational; ever-shifting and emergent.

### **The Art of the Earth: Artistic Vision from the Claude Mirror to Impressionism**

"Local color—what is it?"<sup>9</sup> As if to address the current tendency to conflate local art with the picturesque, Garland defines his preferred mode of fiction against the ways of seeing practiced by the tourist: "[i]t means that the picturesque shall not be seen by the author,—that every tree and bird and mountain shall be dear and companionable and necessary, not picturesque." Thus, while "the tourist cannot write the local novel," the author cannot help but produce local color: "[i]t must go in, it *will* go in, because the writer naturally carries it with him half unconsciously" (*CI* 54, emphasis in original). Garland insists that this distinction entails more than the difference between the traveling interloper and the native inhabitant; his aesthetic, unlike that formulated by practically every commentator on local color and regionalism, does not depend strictly on the subject

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<sup>9</sup> Hamlin Garland, "Local Color in Art," *Crumbling Idols: Twelve Essays on Art Dealing Chiefly with Literature, Painting, and the Drama* [1894], ed. Jane Johnson (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard Univ. Press, 1960), 54. Subsequent citations refer to this edition and will be cited parenthetically as *CI*. This essay draws from the lecture on "Local Color in Fiction" that Garland presented to the Literary Congress at the World's Columbian Exposition in 1893. For discussions of that lecture and the "battle" for realism waged against Mary Hartwell Catherwood that began there, see Newlin (178-80) and Pizer (115-19).

position of the author.<sup>10</sup> Instead, he contrasts two opposing types of artistic vision: a picturesque mode premised on a separation between artist and nature, and an impressionist style in which an act of perception draws the writer and the landscape together, making the visible world both “companionable” and “necessary,” both intimately related to the viewer and inevitably shaped by the viewing. Where the former treats color as a superficial overlay that reinforces the distinction between art and nature, the latter locates in color experience the principles of an aesthetic pitched at the intersection of an embodied artist and a changing environment.

Though still current in Garland’s day, the principles of the picturesque have their roots in an eighteenth-century understanding of vision registered in the theories, practices, and contexts of landscape painting. Jonathan Crary specifies the general mode of this perceptual practice as one in which an “observer confronts a unified space of order, unmodified by his or her own sensory and physiological apparatus, on which the contents of the world can be studied and compared.”<sup>11</sup> This detached way of seeing, premised on the separation of the observer from the observed and on the correspondence of perceptual images to the natural world, is crystallized in the camera obscura, an optical

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<sup>10</sup> As suggested above, Judith Fetterley and Marjorie Pryse are the critics most committed to treating the subject positions of regionalist and local color authors as a key critical heuristic, but the emphasis on an author’s relation to his or her fictional geography runs throughout the criticism on regionalism, often in terms of the distance between the writer and the literary setting. For Brodhead, such distance is the price of admission into the regionalist literary world. He argues that “Garland could only win the literary status that attached to regionalism in his time at the cost of more or less violently estranging himself from the culture of his origin.” Brodhead, *Cultures of Letters*, 140.

Because of the assumed need for the authentic regionalist writer to be *of the people*, Garland’s fictional forays into the Far West have been dismissed as the betrayal of his local color principles. And yet given the proper mode of seeing, the veritist can record any landscape, even those far from home, assuming that the relation between the writer and the subject matter is included in the expression. Thus, in describing his project in *They of the High Trails* (1916), Garland specifies, “I am trying to make my reader see the scene as I see it and not as a native rancher sees it” (qtd. in *EWC* 164). An impressionist can travel without being a tourist.

<sup>11</sup> Jonathan Crary, *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1990), 55.

device that projects an image of the world onto a screen and thereby renders it manageable for scientific study. But while Crary's analysis captures the epistemological models that dominated the eighteenth century, his broad strokes belie the nuances that distinguished the historical ways of seeing that occurred outside the orbit of natural philosophy—most noticeably, he overlooks the particularities of *artistic* vision. Far from attempting a point-for-point correspondence with reality, landscape painters sought to tone and shape the natural world into an image worthy of Art. Indeed, the category of the picturesque depends on this process of modification, denoting as it does a practice of seeing and appreciating nature for its aesthetic qualities. Thus, William Gilpin, the man who coined the term, distinguishes beautiful scenes—those which “please the eye in the *natural state*”—from picturesque views: those which “please through some quality, capable of being *illustrated by painting*.”<sup>12</sup> To see something as picturesque means to view it through the prism of art, here understood as a realm apart from nature and bound by a set of established conventions.

The “prism of art” is of course metaphorical; to enjoy the picturesque, eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century tourists actually looked into a *mirror*—specifically a black, slightly-convex one. The Claude Mirror, so-named because it toned and adjusted the reflected landscape in the manner of the seventeenth-century painter Claude Lorrain, captures the historical configuration of vision soon to be displaced by the optical advances that energized Impressionism. Painters and tourists alike used it to condense

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<sup>12</sup> William Gilpin, *Three Essays: On Picturesque Beauty; On Picturesque Travel; and On Sketching Landscape: to which is Added a Poem, on Landscape Painting* (London: R. Blamire, 1792), 3, emphasis in original. Gilpin first proposed the category ten years earlier in *Observations on the River Wye, and Several Parts of South Wales, etc., Relative Chiefly to Picturesque Beauty; Made in the Summer of 1770* (1782); where the earlier text presents itself as a practical guide for tourists hoping to experience nature as a painter might, the later one offers a more considered explanation of the picturesque as a category distinct from the beautiful and the sublime.

the wide vistas of the natural world into a unified view suited for translation into art; rather than gaze upon raw nature, they literally turned their backs to the scene the better to enjoy its reflection in the Claude Mirror. Gilpin praised the device as a metaphor for the artistic eye, a means by which even the most philistine travelers could see a landscape as a great painter might. In *Remarks on Forest Scenery* (1834), he suggests that with the help of a Claude Mirror, “the eye examines the general effect, the forms of objects, and the beauty of the tints, in one complex view.”<sup>13</sup> The mirror’s convexity transforms a messy natural scene into a unified image, and its tint softens the multiple hues into a more manageable and coherent palette. In these operations, the device assumes an observer detached from the landscape, one whose mechanisms of perception in no way participate in the formation of visual images, and it supposes a model of art that privileges tradition and delights in deliberate distortions meant to improve the natural world.

In addition to the Claude Mirror, visitors to the Lake District and other rustic locales could also aestheticize the landscape with a collection of Claude Glasses, variously-colored monocles that tourists and painters placed over their eyes to render a scene more picturesque.<sup>14</sup> The many available hues—“blue, green, red, yellow, orange,

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<sup>13</sup> William Gilpin, *Remarks on Forest Scenery, and Other Woodland Views*, vol. 2, ed. Sir Thomas Dick Lauder (Edinburgh: Fraser & Co, 1834), 233. For an extensive treatment of black, convex mirrors both before and after their use in picturesque landscape painting, see Arnaud Maillet’s *The Claude Glass: Use and Meaning of the Black Mirror in Western Art* (New York: Zone Books, 2004). This study discusses the popularity of Claude Mirrors among Lake District tourists, and relates an amusing story of Thomas Gray, who, absorbed in his black mirror, tripped over a root when enjoying a “natural” view (17, 164-65).

<sup>14</sup> Cray never mentions the Claude Mirror, and he refers to Claude Glasses only once, when he lumps them in with a series of other devices that function as metaphoric “tools” of the eighteenth century rather than as metonymic “machines” of modernity: “other optical instruments of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, like peep shows, Claude glasses, and print viewing boxes had the status of tools. In the older handicraft-based work, Marx explained, a workman ‘makes use of a tool,’ that is, the tool had a metaphoric relation to the innate powers of the human subject” (TO 131). In contrast to such tools, the machines of the nineteenth century, such as the stereoscope, worked with the capacities and characteristics of the eye to



dark brown, and so on”—each cast a particular tone over the visible world and encouraged spectators to think of their prosthetically-enhanced perceptions as approximations of particular painters.<sup>15</sup> James Plumptre offers a telling satire of these trends in his comic opera *The Lakers* (1798), when Miss Veronica Beccabunga gazes over a stretch of land in the Lake District:

Speedwell, give me my glasses. Where’s my [Thomas] Gray? (*Speedwell gives glasses.*) Oh! Claude and Poussin are nothing. By the bye, where’s my Claude-Lorrain? I must throw a Gilpin tint over these magic scenes of beauty. (*Looks through the glass.*) How gorgeously glowing! Now for the darker. (*Looks through the glass.*) How gloomily glaring! Now the blue. (*Pretends to shiver cold.*) How frigidly frozen! What illusions of vision! The effect is unspeakably interesting.<sup>16</sup>

In addition to lampooning the claims of users that the Claude Glasses endow them with precise painterly vision, Plumptre’s scene specifies the way in which art, for these characters, constitutes a subjective overlay that occurs in the empty space between the perceiving eye and perceived world. In holding this aesthetic view, Veronica was in good company: while Plumptre worked on *The Lakers*, both Samuel Coleridge and Johann Wolfgang von Goethe experimented with colored lenses and speculated on the parallels between color vision and imaginative perception.<sup>17</sup> Where the Claude Mirror reinforced the imagined distance between the artist and the environment, the colored

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produce its effects. Though Crary’s general point holds, he does not pause long enough to consider the implications of the Claude glass’s workings or the ways in which they mark a specifically *aesthetic* technique of perception.

<sup>15</sup> Arnaud Maillet, *The Claude Glass*, 32.

<sup>16</sup> Qtd. in Arnaud Maillet, *The Claude Glass*, 153.

<sup>17</sup> For an insightful reading of Coleridge’s experiments with colored glass, after-images, and others “subjective” color effects, see Rei Terada’s “Coleridge among the Spectra” in *Looking Away: Phenomenology and Dissatisfaction, Kant to Adorno* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 2009).

Glasses offered a model of how artistic minds cast their unique hue over a world that remains unchanged in its empirical reality; after all, they are only “illusions of vision.”

By the time Garland left Iowa to pursue a life of letters in Boston (1884), the Claude Mirror and the broader configuration of artistic vision to which it belonged had been pushed to the recessive margins of aesthetic practice. John Ruskin delivered one of the first direct blows in *The Elements of Drawing* (1857), where he derides the black convex mirror as “one of the most pestilent inventions for falsifying Nature and degrading art which has ever been put into an artist’s hands.”<sup>18</sup> In that same work, Ruskin offers a way forward for art: “The whole technical power of painting,” he insists, “depends on our recovery of what may be called the *innocence of the eye*; that is to say, a sort of childish perception” of the “flat stains of colour” that comprise perceptual experience “without consciousness of what they signify.”<sup>19</sup> Strictly speaking, the picturesque could not exist under such conditions; it requires an eye trained in aesthetic convention, not the innocent vision of a child. Furthermore, Ruskin’s appeal to immediate perception as the locus of art runs counter to the mediations of the Claude Mirror, just as the self-conscious embrace of artifice in eighteenth-century aesthetics contrasts with the commitment to careful observation on display in *The Elements of Drawing*. This shift to a modern mode of painting also alters the status of color: rather

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<sup>18</sup> John Ruskin, *The Elements of Drawing, in Three Letters to Beginners* [1857] (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1877), 210. Ruskin’s barb comes during a discussion of color in painting, and he charges the Claude Mirror with distorting and dampening the hues of the world. Instead of toning the landscape down, Ruskin urges artists to *deepen* their colors rather than *darken* them by painting in rich, pure hues. A single glass will not help the painter here, he continues; “the required effect could only be seen in Nature, if you had pieces of glass of the colour of every object in your landscape, and of every minor hue that made up those colours, and then could see the real landscape through this deep gorgeousness of the varied glass.” But such an instrument would of course be impossible to craft, and in the end Ruskin calls his readers to abandon mediating devices and rely on their own eye: “You can not do this with glass,” he concludes, “but you can do it for yourself as you work” (211).

<sup>19</sup> Ruskin, *Elements of Drawing*, 22, emphasis in original. For a more considered discussion of the “innocent eye” and the trope of childhood in modern art, see the fourth chapter of this dissertation.

than mark a subjective addition to the natural world, the “flat stains of color” that impress themselves upon the eye constitute the very stuff of perceptual reality.

Ruskin preferred Turner, but by the last decades of the nineteenth century the Impressionists had presented themselves as the true bearers of innocent eyes, and it was in Impressionism—both its premises and practices—that Hamlin Garland found a paradigm for an embodied aesthetic. Soon after arriving in Boston, Garland befriended John Joseph Enneking, an American painter who had studied in Paris and adopted the open-air techniques of Monet, Pissarro, and Renoir. Enneking introduced him to a number of local artists and to the styles and controversies of the day, and Garland carried his newfound enthusiasm for the visual arts into lectures, essays, and travelling exhibits throughout the 1890s, eventually penning what has been identified as “probably the first all-out defense of the [Impressionist] movement to be written in English.”<sup>20</sup> In praising the Impressionists, Garland demonstrated the ways in which they both embraced and extended Ruskin’s concept of the innocent eye: like Ruskin, they rejected convention in the name of seeing nature in the raw, but unlike Ruskin they incorporated contemporary knowledge of physiological optics and color relations to craft paintings premised on the perceptual transformations wrought on the world by the eye. The artistic eye was now not only innocent of tradition but also networked with the body and the environment.

In other words, Garland embraced Impressionism as the antithesis both of the picturesque and of the “self colors” of painting. Because Impressionists “strive to

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<sup>20</sup> Qtd. in Pizer, *Hamlin Garland’s Early Work and Career*, 133. Hereafter cited as *EWC*. Among the painters with whom Garland associated, Pizer names “Jerome Elwell, the marine artist William Halsall, and the portraitists Robert Vonnoh and Dennis Bunker” (62). In the late-1880s, Garland “wrote poems on Elwell’s paintings, and visited studios and participated in artistic controversy and conversation,” and in the early-1890s he delivered the lecture on Impressionism that he later revised for *Crumbling Idols* (62). It was this essay that John Rewald cited in his *The History of Impressionism* [1946] (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1973), quoted above. For more on Enneking and on Garland’s term as president of the Central Art Association (1894), see Pizer *EWC*, 133-40.

represent in color an instantaneous effect of light and shade as presented by nature, [. . .] they work in the open air necessarily”—not as a preliminary step and not with the help of a Claude Mirror but as a performance that captures a unique encounter between the artist and the landscape (*CI* 98). Rather than “paint leaves, they paint masses of color; they paint the *effect* of leaves upon the eye,” and this technique generates canvases that convey “unified impressions,” moments of vision as they occur untainted by conceptual processing (*CI* 99, 97, emphasis in original). Thus, the work of condensing, sorting, and unifying a landscape once off-loaded to the Claude Mirror reappears in modern art as the function of the artistic eye itself. No longer a passive instrument of reflection, the painter’s perceptual apparatus acts as a screen that captures and filters the phenomenal world from a particular perspective. The goal of painting then shifts from the creation of a picturesque image that presumes a distinction from natural vision to an empirical attempt to capture “the stayed and reproduced effect of a single section of the world of color upon the eye” (*CI* 98).<sup>21</sup> The Claude Lorrain Mirror becomes Claude Monet’s eye.

“Impressionists are, above all, colorists,” Garland contends, and indeed the embodiment of artistic vision gave color perception a new priority (*CI* 99). Not only did color effects index the encounters between artists and environments that distinguished impressionist painting, but physiological accounts of color vision and discussions of color relations by Helmholtz and Chevreul also constituted the means by which modern science entered into art.<sup>22</sup> Only with a theory of how the human organism processes color stimuli

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<sup>21</sup> Garland insists that the work of the Impressionists “is not hasty” but rather “the result of hard study” (*CI* 105).

<sup>22</sup> Crary’s work, both in *Techniques of the Observer* and in *Suspensions of Perception: Attention, Spectacle, and Modern Culture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999), meticulously tracks the emergence of physiological theories of vision in the nineteenth century. However, because his work seeks to locate the historical shifts that made modern art possible—and to which it responded—he does not emphasize the

could a painter like Renoir, and later Seurat, pair complementary colors to produce gray or juxtapose unmixed hues to create that “peculiar vibratory quality” Garland praises in impressionism (*CI* 101). Such techniques take for granted that “color is never absolutely self-contained,” that it “is always more or less modified by its neighbour or neighbours”;<sup>23</sup> they dismiss artistic local color as absurd and abandon it in the name of an artistic eye that sees only relational effects, one that “makes much of the relation and interplay of light and shade,--not in black and white, but in color” (*CI* 99).

The impressionist approach that Garland advocated in painting participated in a wider late-nineteenth-century endeavor to rethink aesthetics from the perspective of evolutionary biology. This interdisciplinary project, which attracted the efforts of philosophers, scientists, and critics alike, cast artistic practice and aesthetic experience within the framework of the evolved body’s interactions with its sensory and cultural surroundings. Garland immersed himself in these endeavors, reading widely in Hippolyte Taine while in Iowa and discovering Herbert Spencer and Eugène Véron in his years of self-education in the Boston Public Library. “I read both day and night,” Garland later wrote of that moment in his career, “grappling with Darwin, Spencer, Fiske, Helmholtz, Haeckel,--all the mighty masters of evolution whose books I had not hitherto been able to open.”<sup>24</sup> From these writers, the young author learned more than the

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importance of color research on Monet, Renoir, Seurat, and other impressionists and post-impressionists. For such an account, see John Gage’s *Color and Meaning* (Berkeley, CA: Univ. of California Press, 1999), especially chapters 15, 16, and 17.

<sup>23</sup> Eugène Véron, *Æsthetics*, trans. by W. H. Armstrong (Philadelphia: Lippencott & Co., 1879), 228. Subsequent citations refer to this edition and will be included parenthetically as *Æ*.

<sup>24</sup> Hamlin Garland, *A Son of the Middle Border* [1917], with an introduction by Keith Newlin (St. Paul, MN: Borealis Books, 2007), 251. Hereafter cited as *SMB*. “Fiske and Galton and Allen” also occupied Garland in these years, and as an assistant to Moses True Brown, the head of the Boston School of Oratory, he translated parts of Paolo Mantegazza’s *La physionomie et l’expression des sentiments* (1885), which

Spencerian theory of artistic and sociological progress; more importantly, he gained an image of life as the constant interplay between organisms and environments and a notion of art as emerging from—and looping back into—these material and physical interactions.<sup>25</sup> His lessons came from many sources, but Garland singled out the French art critic Eugène Véron as his most formative teacher: on the first page of his copy of Véron's *Æsthetics* (1879), a screed against the Academy that sought to develop a naturalistic account of aesthetics, Garland wrote (for posterity), "This book influenced me more than any other work on art. It entered into all I thought and spoke and read for

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later appeared, in an official translation, as *Physiognomy and Expression* (1890) (SMB 252). For more on Garland's interest in how evolutionary theory contributed to the role of expression in drama, see Pizer, *EWC*, 8-11 and Newlin, *Hamlin Garland*, 64-73.

<sup>25</sup> Donald Pizer's work on Garland in the 1950s and '60s set the parameters for nearly every treatment of Garland's engagement with evolution that has followed. In short, Pizer presents Garland as an enthusiastic Spencerite who saw in the philosopher's law of progress a reason to champion regional fiction as the inevitable next step for literature. See the first chapter of *Hamlin Garland's Early Work and Career* and chapters six and seven of *Realism and Naturalism in Nineteenth-Century American Literature* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois Univ. Press, 1966).

However, recent literary criticism treating the impact of evolutionary thought on late-nineteenth-century Anglo-American literary production has revealed the role of Darwinian thinking to be far more dynamic than Pizer suggests. In particular, critics such as Jane F. Thrailkill, Douglass Mao, and Joan Richardson argue for the importance of the Darwinian theory of life as a series of transactions between an organism and an environment. As Mao writes in *Fateful Beauty: Aesthetic Environments, Juvenile Development, and Literature 1860-1960* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 2008), "the scarcely registered workings of environment on the developing human being were a preoccupation of many kinds of people" at the end of the century, "from artists to scientists, from writers of fiction to crafters of policy, from experts pondering national problems raised by juveniles to parents gnashing their teeth over domestic ones" (5). Thrailkill examines the neurological and physiological accounts of these subtle transactions as they figured into both the content and style of American literary realism, and her consideration of the exchanges between novelists and scientists opens onto a broader argument for the importance of feeling and emotion in literary interpretation. Thrailkill, *Affecting Fictions: Mind, Body, and Emotion in American Literary Realism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 2007). Joan Richardson's *The Natural History of Pragmatism: The Fact of Feeling from Jonathan Edwards to Gertrude Stein* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2007) goes even further in her attention to Darwin's presence in American letters by arguing that the evolutionary idea affects even language itself and that a cast of writers from the eighteenth century to the twentieth have sought to craft a style that accommodates experience's tendency, as William James has it, to overflow its boundaries. These three critics each build on the important work done on evolution and British literature by George Levine, Gillian Beer, and James Krasner. In this chapter, I hope to contribute to this line of inquiry by addressing Hamlin Garland's critical and aesthetic engagements with evolutionary theory, which have to this point been surprisingly overlooked.

many years after it fell into my hands about 1886” (qtd. in *EWC* 21).<sup>26</sup> Garland’s display of admiration places his evolutionary thought in a new light: with Véron and others, he sought to develop an empirical aesthetic, one that found paradigmatic expression in impressionist color perceptions.<sup>27</sup>

An evolving world has no place for correspondence; in an embodied aesthetic, mirror-like mimesis must yield to the selecting functions of the artist’s networked eye. “Life means change,” Garland writes, and just as art takes shape within this process of growth so too must it recognize the capacities and limitations of human perception (*CI* 63). Véron insists on this point: “Art is nothing but a natural result of man’s organization” (*Æ* v). And because our perceptual equipment carves its objects from a flood of sensory stimuli, this “natural result” always bears the marks of selection and arrangement. As William James explains in *The Principles of Psychology* (1890), “our very senses themselves” act as “organs of selection,” for “[o]ut of what is in itself an undistinguishable, swarming *continuum*,” they create “a world full of contrasts,” fit for our engagement.<sup>28</sup> The constant and nonconscious parsing of an environment by an observer thus provides the necessary grounds for an art based on unified perceptual impressions, and it is against this background that we must understand Garland’s repeated assertions that regional art and literature “should rise out of our conditions as

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<sup>26</sup> Despite Garland’s announcement of indebtedness, literary critics have had very little to say about Véron since Pizer presented him as the man who taught Garland to emphasize the “personal reaction to environment” and to tolerate “variation within the practice of local color” (*EWC* 23). In fact, in the past half-century of criticism, little more than a sentence or two has been devoted to this aesthician in any one essay on Garland.

<sup>27</sup> This tradition of thinking aesthetics with the help of evolutionary science reaches full flowering in John Dewey’s *Art as Experience* (1934) and continues in works such as Mark Johnson’s *The Meaning of the Body: Aesthetics of Human Understanding* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2007).

<sup>28</sup> William James, *The Principles of Psychology*, vol. 1 [1890] (New York: Cosimo, 2007), 284.

naturally as the corn grows.”<sup>29</sup> Local color writing offers “a statement of life as indigenous as the plant-growth” because the conduits of its expression—the perceptual equipment of the author—work in concert with the regional surroundings (*CI* 54). Émile Zola presents this naturalistic image of artistic production with a characteristic touch of the sordid: “Like everything else,” Zola explains, “art is a human product, a human secretion; it is our body which sweats out the beauty of our works.” And since “[o]ur body changes according to the climate and customs, [. . .] its secretions change also”; an era’s artistic excrescences result from the unique mixture of physical and cultural forces at play in a particular moment.<sup>30</sup> Garland agrees, though instead of emphasizing the sweat on the artist’s brow he praises the fruit of aesthetic labor: “The corn has flowered, and the cotton-boll has broken into speech” (*CI* 52). The earth, too long silenced by the ideals of traditional art, gains a voice in Garland’s local color as a co-constituent of the selective process by which a perceptual image is formed.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Hamlin Garland, “Productive Conditions of American Literature,” *Forum* XVII.6 (August 1894), 690. Hereafter cited as “PC.” Garland repeats this image in *Crumbling Idols*, first to praise the European authors who “are writing novels and dramas as naturally as the grass or corn or flax grows” and later to liken the contrast of tradition-bound art and regional color to that between “a forced rose-culture” and “the free flowering of native plants” (*CI* 50, 51). Véron makes similar statements, though without the Midwestern imagery: “art, far from being the artificial result of a fortuitous combination of circumstances, which might never have happened at all, is a spontaneous product, the immediate and necessary outcome of human activity” (*Æ* 29). Not only do these claims for a natural and spontaneous art reject aesthetic techniques based on tradition; they also situate the aesthetic as a primary characteristic of experience.

<sup>30</sup> Zola, Émile, “Le Moment Artiste” [“The Moment in Art”] (1866). Qtd. in Elizabeth Gilmore Holt, *The Art of All Nations, 1850-1873: The Emerging Role of Exhibitions and Critics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 1982), 469.

<sup>31</sup> Elsewhere, Garland invokes the earth as the material reality ignored by art premised on convention: “To create in the image of an ideal, ignoring the earth, is like painting the clouds without the landscape” (“PC” 696). In this regard, Garland’s local color provides a literary counterpart to the anti-idealism of William James’s pragmatism, a philosophy that begins by insisting that “[t]he earth of things, long thrown into shadows by the glories of the upper ether, must resume its rights.” William James, *Pragmatism: A New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking* [1907], in *Writings, 1902-1910* (New York: Library of America, 1987), 540.



Thus, the artist and the earth each have a hand in producing crops that talk—but not merely in the sense that an artist chooses particular elements from her surroundings. Rather, art emerges from the processes of perceptual selection that knit an organism and an environment together and thus direct their development. In other words, the embodiment of artistic vision does not render painterly perception subjective but instead gives it an empirical purchase on the dynamic reality revealed by evolutionary science. As Veron explains, all “*truth* as to facts” entails the conditions of embodiment and embeddedness he terms “personality”; every claim to truth necessarily translates into the “truth of our own sensations,” the “truth as we see it, as it appears modified by our own temperaments, preferences, and physical organs. It is, in fact, our personality itself” (*Æ* 389, emphasis in original). “Personality,” then, refers to a selective operation lodged in the body and situated in culture, and it is because “[t]here can be no art without selection” that all art—and indeed all consciousness—takes a “personal” form (*Æ* 360).<sup>32</sup> But as Garland explains in his gloss of this passage, the artist’s personality emerges as a *result* of these selections, rather than the other way around: “‘There can be no art without selection,’ and in this selection, in the arrangement of lines and colors, in the ‘distribution of values,’ the artist appears.”<sup>33</sup> So too the earth: the process of selection that engenders the artist does so only by instituting relations between the perceiver and perceived that, in turn, create the visible world. Art, for Garland, is not simply a “question of one man facing certain facts” but of an artist “telling his individual relations to” those facts (*CI*

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<sup>32</sup> In “The Stream of Consciousness” chapter of *The Principles of Psychology*, James lists as his first principle, “Thought tends to Personal Form.” James, *Principles of Psychology*, 226.

<sup>33</sup> Hamlin Garland, “Sanity in Fiction,” *The North American Review* 176.556 (March 1903), 346.

30). It occurs not through the substantives, but in the relations produced by selections, the relations indexed by impressionist color.

From this perspective, both Véron and Garland denounce photography, along with its pretensions to a colorless and non-relational perspective, as a model for artistic vision. The former proclaims the photograph's presentation of "reality taken from a point of view without connection with us or our impressions" to be "the very negation of art"; its mechanical and non-selective capture of "all the features and details of an object or event" paradoxically produces images that "remain inferior to reality" (*Æ* 389, 105). The view-from-nowhere falls short because it subtracts an essential element of the empirical world: the relations formed through sensory and perceptual experience. For Garland, these missed relations mark both the literal and metaphorical realm of color that eluded nineteenth-century photography. A painting "will never be mere reproduction so long as the artist represents it as he sees it," he writes; "The fact will correct the fancy. The artist will color the fact" (*CI* 63). Coloring here denotes the act of selecting that individuates artistic expression and embeds the observer in nature. It encompasses a field of empirical elements absent in photographic realism but present to the veritist, who writes not of bare facts but of "things *plus* his interest in them—things *plus* his selection of them and distribution of values," as emergent from "the position ascribed to him."<sup>34</sup>

Such is the lesson impressionism has for regionalist fiction, the angle from which Garland redefines local color: all perception *localizes*, it unifies the landscape in an act of vision that bears the marks of both the observer and the environment. The hues of

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<sup>34</sup> Qtd. in Keith Newlin, *Hamlin Garland*, 180, emphasis in original. This portrayal of the veritist's method comes as a response to Eugene Field's characterization of Garland's prose as photographic. "The veritist does *not* 'write things as they are,'" Garland protested, "but *of* things as he *sees* them: which is the whole width of art and the world from the position ascribed to him. His writing is *not* photography."

Monet's haystacks and cathedrals tag the canvas as emerging from a particular moment in a particular place—the light of the French countryside at dawn or at dusk, or the afternoon hues of Rouen. “The point to be made here is this,” Garland writes, “the atmosphere and coloring of Russia is not the atmosphere of Holland. The atmosphere of Norway is much clearer and the colors more vivid than in England. [ . . . ] This brings me to my settled conviction that art, to be vital, must be local in its subject; its universal appeal must be in its working out” (*CI* 103-04). Thus, when Seagraves gazes at a landscape in “Among the Corn-Rows,” the uniqueness of the time, place, and character follow the familiar images of the sea-like prairie made liquid by the spreading mist. “No other climate, sky, plain, could produce the same unnamable weird charm,” the narrator notes, and Seagraves himself concurs: “‘It is American,’ he exclaimed. ‘No other land or time can match this mellow air, this wealth of color, much less the strange social conditions of life on this sunlit Dakota prairie.’”<sup>35</sup> When artistic vision and activity involve opening oneself to feeling the landscape, both the painter and the writer cannot help but see local color.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Hamlin Garland, *Main-Travelled Roads* [1891], (Lincoln, NE: Bison Books of Nebraska Univ. Press, 1995), 89, 90. Hereafter cited as *MTR*.

<sup>36</sup> This understanding of local color informs Mary Austin's discussion of regional literature in “Regionalism in American Fiction” (1932)—though Austin doesn't anchor her thoughts in color perception and thus has no stake in maintaining the moniker “local color.” Mary Austin, “Regionalism in American Fiction,” *The English Journal* 21.2 (February 1932): 97-107. In this essay, Austin defines regionalism as “fiction which has come up through the land, shaped by the author's own adjustments to it” (101). More precisely, “Art, considered as the expression of any people as a whole, is the response they make in various mediums to the impact that the totality of their experience makes upon them, and there is no sort of experience that works so constantly and subtly upon man as his regional environment. It orders and determines all the direct, practical ways of his getting up and laying down, of staying in and going out, of housing and clothing and food-getting” (97). The habits of perception caused by the region's “impact” bear a strong resemblance to the perceptual workings involved in the “impression” in Garland, with one important difference: Austin insists that regionalism emerges through years of dwelling in a place and with a people; Garland, on the other hand, privileges the transitory moment in which an environment is registered on the eye.

Garland's aesthetic, then, rejects both the toned reflections of the Claude Mirror and the deep focus of photography in favor of the color perceptions of the Impressionists. This shift, carried out in the arena of landscape painting but made ready for literature through "local color," entails the embodiment of artistic perception and, as a result, introduces a new image of mimesis, one in which reflection occurs on the model of *colors* rather than mirrors. To be sure, a canvas by Childe Hassam or Mary Cassatt teems with reflection, but the colors that bounce between objects and people in no way model a transparent one-for-one picture of reality.<sup>37</sup> Rather, they index a world in which perceivers absorb, shape, and refract perceptual stimuli through their individuating selections, a reality in which the material composition of each object sorts through the range of potentials in white light to throw a particular hue back at the world. Such is the scene that opens "A Branch Road," the first story in *Main-Travelled Roads*. "The frost began to glisten with reflected color," says the narrator, and the "broad face and deep earnest eyes" of the young protagonist "caught and retained some part of the beauty and majesty of the sky" (*MTR* 6). The entire landscape—including the youth—glisten along with the grass, offering a play of reflected color that indexes the ongoing selections and perceptions that limn a life.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> In "Impressionism," Garland describes a painting that illustrates this artistic mode: in it, a "lamp casts blue-green and orange streaks and blurs of color across the table, and over the white shirts and collars" (*CI* 99). *A Spoil of Office* (1892) offers another such scene when describing a court-house building: "It had nothing to relieve it save the beautiful stains of color that seemed thrown upon the windows by the crimson and orange maples which stood in the yard." Hamlin Garland, *A Spoil of Office: A Story of the Modern West* [1892] (New York: D. Appleton, 1897), 81. Hereafter cited as *SO*.

<sup>38</sup> Likewise, when Rose looks out over the landscape in *The Rose of Dutcher's Coolly* [1895] (Lincoln, NE: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 2005), she "felt the beautiful and splendid phases of nature, and *absorbed and related them to herself*, but she did not consciously perceive, except at rare moments" (29). Hereafter cited as *RDC*.

With this scene in mind, we can now return to the question with which this section began: “Local color—what is it? It means that the writer spontaneously reflects the life which goes on around him. It is natural and unrestrained art” (*CI* 52). The writer reflects his environment in the same way that objects of his vision reflect their colors—through a process of selection which absorbs some aspects, bends others back, and creates an image that changes the stimulus rather than simply represents it. The veritist’s eyes “glisten with reflected color” as they capture the particular impressions of the aesthetic encounter.

### **Colored Shadows**

Garland prided himself on his impressionism; it marked his artistic modernity. “I am an impressionist, perhaps, rather than a realist,” he wrote in 1891, and the mix of empirical theory and aesthetic practice denoted in this affiliation connected him to “[a] whole new world of color [. . .] opening to the eyes of the present generation.” Though a new realm of color was indeed unfolding at this time through the invention of synthetic dyes and new color media, Garland’s comment refers less to the hues of commerce than to a manner of seeing, one that takes its model from color but that extends beyond the physical. “I believe, also,” he continued, “that there is the same wealth of color-mystery in the facts of our daily lives,” ready to be revealed by the new generation of “dramatists and novelists.”<sup>39</sup> What might his color-mystery entail? Garland puts such a question in the mouth of “the gallery-trotter, with eyes filled with dead and buried symbolisms of

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<sup>39</sup> Qtd. in E. F. Harkins, “Famous Authors: Hamlin Garland” [1901], in Charles L. P. Silet, Robert E. Welch, and Robert Bourdreau, eds., *The Critical Reception of Hamlin Garland, 1891-1978* (Troy, NY: Whitson Publishing Co., 1985), 44. Harkins identifies the source as “a letter written in 1891” but provides no further citation.

nature,” who comes across an impressionist canvas: ““Oh, see those dreadful pictures! Where did they get such colors?”” (*CI* 102). In the color-heavy sketches Garland weaves throughout his Middle Border tales and later presents as isolated literary units, these scandalous hues mark a set of philosophical insights and aesthetic techniques on display in painting but available, with modifications, for literature. Where the shifting hues of phenomenal experience present a fluid reality of ever-changing perceptual relations, the “blue and purple shadows” that “shock[ed]” art viewers suggest a method by which artistic expression contributes to a growing reality (*CI* 109). Art and literature, by this model, involve a verification process similar to that detailed by William James in the pragmatist theory of truth—as such, Garland christens himself not a realist, or even an impressionist, but a *veritist*.

Garland’s earliest efforts to wrest the Midwestern landscape into words take the form of colorful sketches tracking the movements of luminous hues. In October of 1886, the same year he encountered Véron’s argument for an art rooted in the human body’s interactions with its surroundings, Garland entered the following passage in his notebook under the title, “A Feast of Color”:

The maples resplendent in all their vivid tints running from light green to the most gorgeous yellows and reds and orange tints. The green orchards shower gold and yellow as light green glows amid the dark green of the foliage. Here and there the dull rich red of the dog vine offsets the soft yellow of russet of the elms and the nut brown of the locust, the green of grass.” (qtd. in *EWC* 140)

This initial foray into color captures many of the features that characterize Garland’s depictions of the visible world: the hues “run” and “shower” through the scene, always on the move; contrasts between lighter and darker tones create a “glow” as colors come into relation to “offset” one another; and a parade of adjectives (“dull rich red,”

“resplendent” and “vivid tints,” “gorgeous yellows,” and a number of “dark” and “light” hues) bespeaks an anxiety on the part of an author overwhelmed at the task of translating this shifting scene. In general, the colors stay wed to their objects (“the dark green of the foliage,” “the nut brown of the locust”), but at times the hues appear unattached, either as fugitive rays reflected from surfaces (the “shower[ing] gold and yellow”) or as the “flat stains of color” seen by the innocent eye (the maples as an ensemble of “vivid tints running from light green to the most gorgeous yellows and reds and orange tints”). Each of these aspects emerges from Garland’s efforts to immerse himself into the landscape, to use his writing to connect to the scene and, in so doing, to register the chaotic world of sensory stimuli as it becomes organized through perception’s filtering operations.

To track the selections that localize an image, Garland first sets his colors streaming. He casts the hues of the landscape as a liquid medium that washes over and among the objects of perception. In a western sketch from his late-1880s notebooks, which reappears verbatim in “God’s Ravens” (1894), Garland describes how “the golden June sunshine fell, filling the valley from purple brim to purple brim”; the liquid images multiply as the sunshine rushes through the scene, leaving it roiling: “Down over the hill to the west the light *poured*, tangled and glowing in the plum and cherry trees, leaving the *glistening* grass *spraying* through the elms, and flinging *streamers* of pink across the shaven green slopes where the cattle fed” (qtd. in *EWC* 141, emphasis added). Throughout *Main-Travelled Roads*, Garland presents “ever-shifting streaming banners of rose and pale green,” warm lamplight that “stream[s] out the door,” “bars of faint pink [that] stream[] broadly away,” and a sun that “streams” light over fields, trees, and valley (*MTR* 5, 30, 28, 69, 126). Light flows in Garland, and in the drama of absorption and

reflection it sets objects in motion: in *A Spoil of Office* (1892), the narrator says of life on the prairies, “There were mornings when the glittering purple and orange domes of the oaks and maples *swam* in the mist dreamfully,” and in *The Captain of the Gray-Horse Troop* (1902), the “vivid October sun [. . .] transmute[s]” the grass “into something that shimmered.”<sup>40</sup> In the “flood of dazzling light” that courses through Garland’s prose, the objects of perception float back into the rush of sensation, drawing the observer into a flexible world of shifting relations in which objects are made and remade with every glance (*MTR* 97).<sup>41</sup>

Yet this flood of colors is not oceanic. Garland does not wash the observer away in a mystic tide but rather imagines rivulets of light drawn together in a perceptual unity, a *stream* of consciousness. The hues grow and unfold in time, but their relational effects rely on the localizing perceptions of the human observer, and Garland captures this double emphasis on relations among objects and between viewers and the viewed with the liberal use of hyphens. His changing colors flex against the rigid categories of color words, especially in his sketches from the 1890s. In the posthumous “Chicago Studies”

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<sup>40</sup> *SO* 31; Hamlin Garland, *The Captain of the Gray-Horse Troop* (New York: Harper Brothers, 1902), 17-18.

<sup>41</sup> The liquid imagery exceeds even the many references listed above. In “Western Landscapes,” a series of sketches published in *Atlantic Monthly* in 1893, the sunshine “gr[ows] to a white radiance that flooded everything in a blinding, shadowless light,” and, at a different moment, shadows move across a mountain “like an engulfing sea.” Hamlin Garland, “Western Landscapes,” *Atlantic Monthly* 72.434 (Dec. 1893), 808, 806. Hereafter cited as “WL.” In *The Rose of Dutcher’s Coolly*, a “vividly green valley” is “flooded with orange light, heaped and brimming full of radiance and fragrance,” and the sun appears as “a magical cataract of etherealized gold” (*RDC* 138, 96).

Garland’s insights about the liquidity of light have recently been pursued by anthropologist Michael Taussig, whose description of a February dawn would be right at home in one of Garland’s tales: “The dawn is a great teacher. You see light gradually creeping among the shadows in the forest left by the night. It is a warm, soft, blurry, creaturely substance, *liquid light* we might say, with a golden touch and depths to it as well.” Likewise for the sunset: “The sun becomes more orange as it sets. But what really gets you going, [. . .] what caught your eye and very being in the first place, was the unnamable color—a type of light purple, some subtle mist of green and blue with some red and yellow in there too that was, you realize, more than color as in coloring but some other medium altogether.” Michael Taussig, *What Color is the Sacred?* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2009), 38.



(c. 1890s), Garland follows Lake Michigan as it grows from “blue-black” to “yellow-gray,” and he notes how “foam-flowers bloomed” from the “green-black” tide.<sup>42</sup> Elsewhere, “gray-black” smoke obscures the street and “darkly-blue masses” of buildings stand before “the gray-white vague sky.”<sup>43</sup> In “Salt Water Day,” a *Cosmopolitan* piece from 1892, Garland describes the Jersey Shore in terms of similar changes, performed in more lively colors: the sea shifts from “pinkish-gray” at the horizon to “grass-green” in the foam of the waves, and as the sun sets it cools to a “gray-blue.”<sup>44</sup> Elsewhere, Garland evokes “yellow-green,” “blue-green,” “yellow-brown,” “purple-brown,” “purple-black,” “gray-green,” “bronze-greens,” “rose-pink,” and “whitish-yellow”—as well as “slate-blue,” and “deep-green”—to encourage his readers to catch the shifting, streaming nature of color (*CI* 98, 99; *MTR* 8, 200, 202; qtd. *EWC* 141; “WL” 808; *MTR* 201,16, 25, 100).<sup>45</sup> Rather than form a new hue, as they would in the visual arts, these hybrid colors strain the limits of language to produce an evolving tone that morphs in the process of reading. As a result, they mark the transitional moments at which Garland’s art occurs—the events wherein an observer perceiving an environment emerges as a hyphenated entity, singular yet networked to the world.

To observe these hybrid hues, one must not only *see* but also *feel* the surrounding landscape; only then does the body take its place within nature to register impressions rather than stand apart to gaze upon a picturesque scene. Indeed, Garland’s colors have a

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<sup>42</sup> Stronks, “A Realist Experiments with Impressionism,” 49. Stronks’s article presented the “Chicago Studies” to the public for the first time and remains the sole place where they are collected.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 50.

<sup>44</sup> Hamlin Garland, “Salt Water Day,” *Cosmopolitan* 13.4 (August 1892), 389, 390, 391. Hereafter cited as “SWD.”

<sup>45</sup> “Bronze-greens” comes from Hamlin Garland, “Mount Shasta,” *The Midland Monthly* 2 (Dec. 1894), 481.

texture as well as a look: there are “velvety purples,” “soft yellow[s],” “a fine purple,” and “velvety-brown” that comprise “softened” harmonies, and various hues can coalesce into a “tenderer, more subdued cloak of color” (qtd. in *EWC* 140-41; *SO* 40). Many of Garland’s characters come to feel these colors only after undergoing an ordeal in which they are alienated from and then reunited with their bodies. In “A Branch Road,” Will’s threshing leaves him with “a weird feeling of being suddenly deaf” and with legs “so numb that he could hardly feel the earth,” and his jealousy and anger combine to blind him to his sensory surroundings until he returns to town to awaken new visions in Agnes (*MTR* 17). “God’s Ravens” presents this process in even clearer terms. Rob, a writer who arrives in Wisconsin from Chicago to live the picturesque life, keeps the community at a distance, and this social detachment then becomes literalized as physical dislocation when he falls ill on his way home from the post office: “he felt blind for a moment,” and “[t]he world of vivid green grew gray, and life receded from him into an illimitable distance” (*MTR* 208). When he awakens, nursed back to health by the townspeople, he “feel[s] his body as if it were an alien thing,” and this newfound awareness of his physical self—of himself as physical—readies him to take in the visual world. The farmer William McTurg turns him toward the window, and “a new part of the good old world burst on his sight. The sunshine streamed in the windows through a waving screen of lilac leaves and fell upon the carpet in a priceless flood of radiance” (*MTR* 209). Streaming sunshine, waving screens, radiant floods: all the tools of Garland’s color technique appear only after his characters have learned to feel as well as see.

Rob’s convalescence brings us back to our earlier questions about the “new world of color” Garland presents to his readers: in short, where do the new colors come from,

and what does it mean to see them? Nowhere are these issues taken up as clearly as in the case of colored shadows. “To most eyes,” Garland writes, “the sign-manual of the impressionist is the blue shadow” (*CI* 102). Even more so than the other glowing tones of modern painting, the presence of blues and purples where audiences expected to see grays and blacks caused a “shock,” as well as a fair amount of ridicule (*CI* 109). Yet for Garland, “[t]o see these colors is a development,” not only because they are “flags of anarchy” waved in the faces of tradition-bedazzled critics, but also because they mark a process by which artistic vision reveals an overlooked feature of the empirical world (*CI* 102, 109). The practice began with Monet and Renoir as part of their project of incorporating the science of color—and especially that of complementary colors—into art. “No shadow is black,” Renoir insisted; “Nature knows only colors,” and indeed studies in optics suggested that light of a certain color casts a shadow of the complementary hue.<sup>46</sup> Since sunshine often has a yellow or orange tint, this research explained, shadows tend to have violet or blue in them. Once postulated, cool-colored shadows soon became the most extreme case of the artist’s innocent eye, which now both assumed and contributed to the claims of science.<sup>47</sup>

In the stories and sketches from the mid-1890s, Garland hardly lets a landscape pass without mention of a colored shadow. Though the original *Main-Travelled Roads*

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<sup>46</sup> Qtd. in John Rewald, *The History of Impressionism*, 210.

<sup>47</sup> Colored shadows appear in the work of philosophers, scientists, and artists alike during the 1890s, often standing as an illustration of the ways in which concepts get in the way of clear vision, of how what we *think* we are looking at affects what we see. M. André Bracchi discusses these issues in “The Sense of Color,” an article from *Popular Science* 55 (June 1899): “If we visit the exhibitions of the impressionists we shall be entertained at the criticisms we hear over the canvases of such painters as Renoir and Monet; youths who have just come out of the drawing school declare that their master never taught them to put blue on a face, and that in Nature all shadows are gray or black, and none red or violet [. . .]. ‘All skies are blue, all trees are green, all pantaloons are red,’ said a celebrated painter who was trying to show how the habit of seeing a colored object in a certain way prevented one from perceiving the different colors that might be applied to it. [. . .] Yet there are in Nature shadows that are blue and reflections that are green, and if we do not see them habitually it is because we do not give sufficient attention to them” (253-54).

tales include only two such shocking hues—the “rose-color and orange shadows” thrown “along the edges of the slate-blue clouds” in “A Branch Road”—*A Spoil of Office* from the following year presents “dull-blue shadows” cast by a kerosene lamp, “gray-blue shadows” that “streamed from the trees upon the yellow-green grass,” and “blue shadows [. . .] on the new-fallen snow vivid as steel” (*SO* 355, 31, 139). Similar images pepper his writing for *Cosmopolitan*, *McClure’s*, and *The Midland Monthly* from these years, and his “Western Landscapes” for *Atlantic*, unlike his notebook sketches from the late 1880s, feature “deep purple shadows” and “shadows darkly purple” that move within the scene like a “blue-shadow sea” (“WL” 805, 806).<sup>48</sup> In these passages, Garland declares his impressionistic allegiance and parades the impact that modern art had on his narrative eye.

Yet an exclusive emphasis on the ekphrastic elements of Garland’s prose obscures the constitutive role that language and writing play in the perception of blue shadows and thus misses the literary lessons that Garland takes from these controversial colors. After all, Garland did not initially register the violets and steel-blues with his own innocent eye; rather, he “got [his] first idea of colored shadows from reading one of Herbert Spencer’s essays,” and only then did he “see blue and grape-color in the shadows on the snow” (*CI* 102). The essay in question, “The Valuation of Evidence” (1853), takes this tangle of concepts and perception as its very subject, outlining the reciprocal ways in which scientific observations can be compromised: “the presence of hypothesis and the

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<sup>48</sup> See also the “violet-shadowed sails” in “Salt Water Day” (394); the “violet shadows” in “Homestead and Its Perilous Trades: Impressions of a Visit,” *McClure’s* III.I (June 1894), 14; and the “blue shadows” that “warm[] to violet” as the light shifts on “Mount Shasta,” 481, 482.

absence of hypothesis.”<sup>49</sup> After surveying a number of instances in which researchers recorded phenomena consistent with their expectations but, as it later turned out, inconsistent with the data, Spencer offers the case of colored shadows as an example of how clear perception often requires a fresh idea to break free of unreflective habit.<sup>50</sup> “Ask any one who has received no culture in art, or who has given no thought to it, of what color a shadow is, and the unquestioning reply will be—black”: Spencer spent much of his youth assuming this “creed of the uninitiated,” even “quoting all of [his] experience” to deny the contrary claims of an amateur artist. But eventually he encountered “a popular work on Optics” proposing that “the colour of a shadow is always the complement of the colour of the light casting it,” and in setting out to discover the grounds for the claim, Spencer both learned to see multihued shadows and eventually hit upon an explanation that provided Garland with yet another model for “local color” (“VE” 165). “In seeking answers,” Spencer explains,

it soon became manifest that as a space in shadow is a space from which the *direct* light along is excluded, and into which the *indirect* light (namely, that reflected by surrounding objects, by the clouds and by the sky) continues to fall, the colour of a shadow must partake of the colour of everything that can either radiate or reflect light into it. Hence, the colour of a shadow must be *the average colour of the diffused light*; and must vary, as that varies, with the colours of all surrounding things. (“VE” 165-66, emphasis in original)

Colored shadows emerge from their surroundings; like the local color writer, they absorb and reflect the sum of their environment, from nearby objects to the clouds in the sky,

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<sup>49</sup> Herbert Spencer, “The Valuation of Evidence” [1853], *Essays: Scientific, Political, and Speculative* (New York: Appleton, 1907), 162. Hereafter cited “VE.”

<sup>50</sup> The distinction between these two cases is slight, and one could argue that the case of the colored shadow is one in which the observer has a preexistent idea (shadows are black) that prevents the perception of blue or purple. But Spencer treats this idea as a lack of an idea, since it is not consciously held or accepted. Spencer sums up as follows: “On the one hand, a pre-conception, makes us liable to see things not quite as they are, but as we think them. On the other, in the absence of a pre-conception, we are liable to pass over much that we ought to see” (“VE” 166-67).

and their appearance relies on the presence of a proper interpretive mindset, a “blue-shadow idea” (*CI* 97).<sup>51</sup> No wonder, then, that Garland likens the colored shadows of his nature scenes to “stains of ink”: they are both the products and the ambition of veritism’s impressionistic local color.<sup>52</sup>

As with Spencer, Garland’s textual encounter with the “idea of colored shadows” prompts a series of experiments; both concepts and practice are necessary to experience the “wealth of color-mystery” immanent in “our daily lives” (*CI* 102). In particular, Garland submits his body to unusual positions and uncommon speeds in order to enter a “world of frank color” that renders the common-sense realm of muted tones “depressing” (*CI* 103). “By turning my head top-side down,” Garland reports, “I came to see that shadows falling upon yellow sand were violet,” and the visual effects of these contortions are then matched by those of horseback riding: “On my horse I caught glimpses of this marvellous land of color as I galloped across some bridge. In this world stone-walls were no longer cold gray, they were warm purple, deepening as the sun westered.” At the periphery of vision, this “marvellous land” opens into “a radiant world” that flickers into view “through the corners of [his] eyes” only to “vanish[] as magically as it came” (*CI* 102).<sup>53</sup> Garland thus offers a series of embodied practices through which the “blue-

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<sup>51</sup> In “New Fields,” Garland states that the local literature of the Pacific “will be such a literature as no other locality could produce, a literature that could not have been written in any other time, or among other surroundings” (*CI* 26). Like that of a shadow, the color of a locale reflects and embodies the relations it holds to its environment.

<sup>52</sup> In “God’s Ravens,” “deep-blue shadows everywhere stream like stains of ink” (*MTR* 196), and in *A Spoil of Office*, “the shadows stood out upon the shining expanse vivid as stains of ink” (154).

<sup>53</sup> Garland narrates these scenes as early moments in the awakening of his openness to the visual world, and they culminate in a performance of his color-vision: “As I write this, I have just come in from a bee-hunt over Wisconsin hills, amid splendors which would make Monet seem low-keyed. [. . .] Amid bright orange foliage, the trunks of beeches glowed with steel-blue shadows on their eastern side. Sumach flamed with marvellous brilliancy among deep cool green grasses and low plants untouched by frost. Everywhere amid the red and orange and crimson were lilac and steel-blue shadows, giving depth and vigor and buoyancy which Corot never saw (or never painted)” (*CI* 103).

shadow idea” materializes in the world. In this context, he likens Impressionism to a scientific breakthrough: its new colors constitute “a discovery, born of clearer vision and more careful study,—a perception which was denied the early painters, precisely as the force we call electricity was an ungovernable power a generation ago” (*CI* 110).<sup>54</sup> Far from the subjective overlay imposed by the Claude Glasses, these hues arise from empirical study and reveal a world of shifting relations and situated perspectives in which the rigid categories of subjective fancy and objective fact no longer apply.<sup>55</sup> As Garland insists, “[t]he change in method” that produces “vivid and fearless coloring, indicates a radical change in attitude toward the physical universe” (*CI* 109).

If impressionism discovers a new world of mysterious colors, its burden—and the task of aesthetics conceived not only in the wake of evolutionary science but also as itself an empirical endeavor—is to communicate these visions to others. In the realm of

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<sup>54</sup> Grant Allen, another writer Garland encountered in the Boston Public Library, makes a similar observation in *Physiological Aesthetics* (1877). After remarking that the “common mind [. . .] translates the outward impression too rapidly into the reality which it symbolizes,” he contends that “the highest artist, in his very fidelity to nature, lays himself open in the mind of the vulgar to the charge of imagining or inventing the faint effects of colour which *he* has the skill and care to perceive, but which *they* neither do see, can see, nor take the trouble to see.” Grant Allen, *Physiological Aesthetics* (London: Henry S. King, 1877), 51.

<sup>55</sup> Despite this evidence of the empirical nature of both veritism and impressionism, Garland’s critics—both friends and enemies—cast veritism as a relativism. Arthur Inkersley levies the first such charge in a review of *Crumbling Idols*, in which he glosses impressionism and veritism as twin doctrines that celebrate the author’s subjective whims against the world’s hard facts. To illustrate, he takes the “extreme case” of a color-blind painter whose “impressions” of the landscape include “[r]ed grass and green cows”; in such a case, Inkersley insists, we give away too much if we cede the ability to denounce such representations as false. Arthur Inkersley, “The Gospel According to Hamlin Garland” [1895], in Charles L. P. Silet, Robert E. Welch, and Richard Boudreau, eds. *The Critical Reception of Hamlin Garland, 1891-1978*, 21-22. The difference between green cows and blue shadows, we will see, has to do with their varying abilities to be seen by others, to be *verified*.

James B. Stronks recognizes the “impersonality” of impressionism, but he withholds such understanding from Garland. Rather than track the ways in which Garland engages with impressionism as a model of an empirical aesthetic, he accuses Garland of holding a “faulty” notion of the impression that serves only to grease the transition “from objective realism to a more permissive mode of fiction.” Stronks, “A Realist Experiments with Impressionism,” 41. In other words, Stronks does not recognize the ways in which Garland took from the modern critique of local color in painting ways to approach local color in fiction.

literature, Garland makes this process of translating individual perspectives to a wider community a central feature of his veritism. The veritist “sets himself a most arduous task”: “[h]is art consists in making others feel his individual and distinctive comment on the life around him” (“PC” 695). Literature requires not only the personal impressions that emerge through the sorting operations of consciousness but also a procedure by which these perceptions take hold in a reader. The writer thus feels an environment from a particular vantage, and then, “[i]f he is an artist, [. . .] make[s] his reader feel it through his own emotion” (*CI* 54). At times, Garland describes this process in words that recall a perspective prior to the “radical change in attitude toward the physical universe”; he says that veritism consists of “an individual impression corrected by reference to fact” or of an individual manner of writing “corrected by reference to life” (“PC” 690, 692). But “reference,” “fact,” and “life,” must all be read under the sign of evolution. “Life is always changing,” Garland states, “and literature changes with it”; therefore, facts are always “perceived fact[s]” and reference involves a prospective rather than retrospective maneuver (*CI* 64). To reference the world is to jump into the flow of experience and to act according to an idea, to look for blue shadows through the corner of your eye or from atop a galloping horse. As such, the process of communicating a feeling involves embodied practice, and the veritist approaches the reader as an embodied organism: she “has faith in the physiology rather than the pathology of human life” (“PC” 695).<sup>56</sup> The literary event thus extends through time and across bodies, and the effects that flow from a novel or short story proceed through the subtle ways in which the feelings and perceptual habits embedded in a style interact with the cognitive operations of a reader.

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<sup>56</sup> This formulation reoccurs in “Sanity in Fiction” (1903), where it is attributed to Max Nordau’s essay “The Importance of Fiction” (1886). Garland, “Sanity in Fiction,” 343.



Veritism in its full sense thus entails a process of verification, one resonant with the pragmatist philosophy of William James. Garland reflected that he christened his style with “a word which subtended verification,”<sup>57</sup> and his future-oriented aesthetic grounded in readings of evolutionary theory and psychological research sets him squarely within James’s intellectual domain.<sup>58</sup> In particular, James separates truth from correspondence and situates it within a world of process. “The truth of an idea is not a stagnant property inherent in it,” he writes in *Pragmatism* (1907); “Truth *happens* to an idea. It *becomes* true, is *made* true by events. Its verity is in fact an event, a process: the process namely of its verifying itself, its veri-*fication*.”<sup>59</sup> Likewise, the truths of veritism unfold along two processual paths: the acts of sorting, filtering, and registering the landscape that comprise the event of composition; and the acts of sorting, filtering, and registering the text that make up the moment of reading. The different stimuli allow for

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<sup>57</sup> Garland included this explanation in response to an inquiry from Eldon Hill, a Ph.D. student writing about Garland in the late 1930s. A carbon copy of the letter, dated 14 February 1939, can be found in the Hamlin Garland Papers in the Doheny Library at the University of Southern California. Keith Newlin has also posted a copy on his Hamlin Garland website under the title “Garland on Veritism,” <http://people.uncw.edu/newlink/garland/veritism.htm> (accessed May 2, 2010). The letter begins as follows:

You ask about my use of the word VERITIST. I began to use it in the late nineties [sic]. Not being at that time a realist in the sense in which the followers of Zola use it, I hit upon the word veritist which I may have derived from Veron. In truth I was an impressionist in that I presented life and landscape as I personally perceived them but I sought a deeper significance in the use of the word, I added a word which subtended verification. I sought to verify my impressions by comparing impressions separated [by] an interval of time.

For more on the origin of the “veritism,” see Pizer, *EWC*, 124-26. Pizer, whose memory is better than Garland’s in this case, shows that Garland’s first printed use of the term appears in his *Arena* article on Ibsen in June, 1890. Véron never used the term veritism, but his emphasis on “truth” and “personality” may have guided Garland in his coinage.

<sup>58</sup> Pizer too recognizes an affinity between pragmatism and veritism on the grounds of their commitment to evolutionary theory. However, his characterization of James flattens out the complexities of verification into a philosophy bordering on relativism. He explains: “Garland, then, conceived of literature as his contemporaries in American philosophy, the pragmatists—also founding their system upon evolutionary thought—conceived of ideas. Just as ideas are never absolute because they must work in the world and the world is ever changing, so art has no absolutes, but must reflect and interpret and ever-changing world by means of new material and new forms. And just as William James’s pragmatism established a pluralistic universe in which the individual is the source of truth, so Garland conceived of artistic truth as pluralistic and as centered in the individual artist” (*EWC* 127).

<sup>59</sup> William James, *Pragmatism*, 574.

different experiences, but in each case a particular truth—entangled with a particular perspective—emerges through a transaction between a perceiver and an environment.

Pragmatism and veritism thus mark complementary attempts to embed thought and writing within the work of the world. In his critique of Spencer's correspondence theory of mind, James insists that "the knower is not simply a mirror floating with no foot-hold anywhere"; instead, "[t]he knower is an actor, a co-efficient of the truth on one side, whilst on the other he registers the truth which he helps to create." Individual interests, proclivities, and hunches—all of the messy elements of cognition that Spencer excludes but that a writer cannot help but engage—all "help to *make* the truth which they declare."<sup>60</sup> As such, Garland imagines the writer as beginning *in media res*: "Born into a web of circumstance, enmeshed in common life, the youthful artist begins to think" (*CI* 53). So positioned, the project of representing reality gives way to that of arranging, reworking, and condensing the material of experience in order to add to reality's stock. Works of art "excel the reality from which they spring; they condense and complete it" through their compositions, and through this "condensation" they "attain [. . .] an intensity of effect that we do not meet in nature" (*Æ* 103). Here Véron measures the truth of art not by its beauty or verisimilitude but by the intensity of the feelings it provokes, and this redefinition positions the artist to shape an emerging reality at the level of those subtle yet consequential transactions between texts and their readers, readers and their

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<sup>60</sup> William James, "Remarks on Spencer's Definition of Mind as Correspondence" [1878], in *Writings, 1878-1899* (New York: Library of America, 1992), 908. Early on in his essay, James criticizes Spencer's theory for stripping mental life of all the elements at work in fiction: Spencer's law, he contends, requires readers "to erase from literature (if by literature were meant anything worthy of the title 'mental product') all works except treatises on natural science, history, and statistics" (895).

environments.<sup>61</sup> Reality grows; new colors emerge in the shadows, and Garland's veritism installs itself in the midst of these developments, the better to direct the truths they produce.

### **Vocal Color**

As we have seen, Garland grasped the "radical change in attitude toward the physical universe" through the material colors of modern art: the localizing color perceptions of impressionism, the empiricism of purple shadows, and the relational character of color identity all equipped him to recast aesthetics from the perspective of evolution's subtle transactions between embodied organisms and streaming environments. In the process, Garland's colors go metaphorical. They neither remain tied to the qualities of literal hues nor imitate the visual techniques of painting, but rather transport the insights learned from these realms onto the figurative plane of "local color" in fiction. The reach of color in Garland's work thus exceeds the many mentions of blue shadows and shifting hues to touch the narrative techniques he develops to address the challenges posed by the literary impression. Like a painting, a novel must proceed from the act of feeling its surroundings, but the scope of what can be felt by a writer far exceeds that of a artist, encompassing not only physical perceptions but also the whole range of ideas, emotions, and social relations shaped and transmitted through language. Garland channels this expansiveness into the project of realizing the perspectives of regional inhabitants, and to do so he dramatizes the interplay of embedded observations

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<sup>61</sup> In *Affecting Fictions*, Jane F. Thraikill offers a similar revision of realism, though neither her nor her writers feel compelled to toss out the term (as do Garland and Véron). "Works of literary realism," she writes, "[. . .] are not photographic representations of a real world elsewhere; they are condensations and expansions of human thought, sentience, and experience" (26).

and cultivates *tone* as the vocal register able to broaden the scope of communication beyond mere propositions. Alongside these techniques, both as an impetus for and a product of his literary style, he forges a vision of the nation as a relational network of evolving locales and of the individual as an entity at once singular and overflowing. He imagines America and its citizens on the model of color.

The same trends that lodged perception in the body landed language there as well, and aestheticians such as Véron pursued the idea that words form connections with other sensations in the complex networks of the nervous system. Such an integrated image of language produced grand claims for the literary impression: it “embraces all feelings without exception” and “lends itself [. . .] to a successful mingling of ideas and sensations” (*Æ* 90, 351). Moreover, Véron argues that the addition of thought and intellect in poetry increases the intensity of the overall aesthetic impression, just as conscious thought brings us into deeper and more meaningful contact with our physical environment.<sup>62</sup> The literary arts thus turn on rendering the multifaceted aspects of social life in a linguistic form that, through reading, might be felt. And these sensations are no less bodily for being intellectual. In “A Branch Road,” Garland narrates “a strange and powerful feeling of the passage of time” that takes hold in Will as he returns home; the “vague feeling” combines with the rustling leaves and the song of the birds, and the ensemble pulses within the mind’s recesses: “It was a feeling hardly to be expressed in words—one of those emotions whose springs lie far back in the brain” (*MTR* 26).

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<sup>62</sup> Speaking of how intelligent action increases rather than curtails the possibilities for affective experience, Véron hazards, “We might even venture to say that feeling and passion have [. . .] grown in power and excitability as much as intellectual life has increased in intensity, and as the progress of analysis has taught him to seize a greater number of points of harmony between himself and his surroundings” (*Æ* 25). In the terms of systems theory, linguistic systems are more complex and therefore engage a more complex environment.

Garland likens the process of conveying this aggregate feeling to the impressionist technique of painting “the *effect* of leaves upon the eye”: in an essay on “Literary Prophecy,” Garland proclaims that the “novel of the future [. . .] will teach, as all earnest literature has done, by effect: but it will not be by direct expression, but by placing before the reader the facts of life as they stand related to the artist.” This set of relations, perceived and communicated as an integrated impression, “will not be put in the explanatory notes” as in a social treatise; instead, it “will address itself to the perception of the reader” (*CI* 143). It will be felt.<sup>63</sup>

An impression so expanded changes the context and method of composition. After all, a writer does not capture the rhythm of conversation while holding a discussion nor render the drama of a political crisis from amid the rally. Literature is not written *en plein air*, and even though Garland incorporated his sketch work into his narratives, he did much of his writing away from the scenes of his stories. This insertion of distance has long occupied critics of regionalism, and its presence in Garland’s work has been variously treated as part of an imperialist logic, a cosmopolitan vantage, and an analysis of regional writing’s complicity in exploitative markets.<sup>64</sup> But as the stories make clear, Garland brings embedded local views into contact with outsider standpoints to explore the workings of individual perceptions, which remain inaccessible to the perceiver. This method stays true to his veritism by keeping all perspectives embedded and at the same time uses the mode of one perception to gain purchase on another, and vice versa.

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<sup>63</sup> Garland distinguishes between two types of effects. Above, he celebrates the “effect” that marks the act of feeling the force of an artwork, the act of creating an impression. Elsewhere, he denounces “effectism” as a literary mode that relies on cheap thrills and sentimentalism to titillate its readers without any greater purpose. See Garland, “PC,” 693-96 and Pizer, *EWC*, 124-25. Though the distinction surely falters, Garland meant it to distinguish writing that remained at the level of painting (sensation) and writing that engaged the full potential of language.

<sup>64</sup> Respectively, see Amy Kaplan, “Nation, Region, Empire”; Tom Lutz, *Cosmopolitan Vistas*; and Stephanie Foote, *Regional Fictions*.

Howard McLane's urbane detachment sees elements of the landscape invisible to his brother Grant; Rob's dinner preparations in "Among the Corn-Rows" prevent him from seeing the "wealth of color" Seagraves celebrates in the prairie; and Julia, in the same story, must break from her field work before gazing "through half-shut lids" at "the sea of deep-green" before her (*MTR* 100). In each of these cases, "[h]ard life, toil, lack of leisure, have deadened and calloused the perceiving mind" and crippled the potential of local art (*CI* 16). Garland the critic calls for a literature immersed in the soil, but in his short stories he recognizes the need for an outside perspective, one able to enter the landscape and open itself onto the physical and social impressions of a region. Only then can the writer feel the world as it coalesces around a rural community, and only then might those feelings gain an articulation closed off to the laborer. As such, his narrative voice jumps among the various perspectives presented in a story, dipping into free indirect discourse only to jerk back to a wider, yet always limited, viewpoint. This slippery mode of narration allows Garland to mine the felt experience of his characters without relinquishing the flexibility afforded by an aesthetic distance. The end of "Salt Water Day" suggests the rewards of such a technique: "That this scene sinks deep into their starved souls I know, for I have been a toiler in the harvest fields and know what the heat is between the corn rows. Their enjoyment is dumb, shy of expression, almost inarticulate; but they perceive the beautiful, after all, and its effects are as lasting as granite" ("SWD" 394). The subjects of this journalistic sketch sense their surroundings, but they are unable to give their impressions voice, unable to communicate their natural and unconscious perceptions. The veritist works by realizing these perspectives in prose and presenting them as literary effects to be activated in the reading experience.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> In "Up the Coolly," one of the most focused examinations of the interplay between distanced and

Garland's stories thus investigate the linguistic medium's capacity to reveal how perceptual modes are activated and arranged within a social context, and in doing so they experiment with *tone* to exercise the full expressive range of language.<sup>66</sup> His color sketches often belie the anxiety over casting vision into words that prompts these experiments. For instance, a notebook entry from 1886 records a sunset that generates "an indescribable color neither pink nor purple," and a stirring scene in the coolies appeals to Rose "with a power which transcended words" (qtd. in *EWC* 141, *RDC* 69). Moments of "unnamable" vision weave throughout Garland's prose, and yet the very quality that defies description—color—lies open to language through the register of tone.<sup>67</sup> The veritist, Garland writes, "aims to be perfectly true in his delineation of his relation to life, but there is a tone, a color, which comes unconsciously into his utterance" (*CI* 43). Here metaphorical color marks the individuating processes of selection as they enter into the writer's speech. Indeed many of Garland's characters attempt to communicate their thoughts and feelings through tone more so than literal meaning.<sup>68</sup>

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immersed perspectives, Garland dramatizes this silence and the care with which the writer must undo it. After the aesthete Howard remarks on the beauty of the hillside, the locals fall quiet: "There was only dead silence to this touching upon the idea of beauty" (*MTR* 74). Throughout the story, Howard fails to imagine himself into Grant's position; he cannot bring his own sensitivity to the landscape to bear in the task of feeling and communicating the social situation of prairies. His epiphanies show promise, but his actions always lead him astray.

<sup>66</sup> For more on the meaning of tone in literature, especially as it relates to color, see Chapter Two of this dissertation, especially the section titled "Color Unspoiled."

<sup>67</sup> See the "indescribably pure" air in "A Branch Road" or the "unnamable weird charm" in "Among the Corn-Rows," as well as the colors that "transfigure[] the shabby interior" of a church into space "more beautiful than words can tell" (*MTR* 5, 89; *SO* 68). Likewise, the narrative of "Salt Water Day" begins with the recognition of language's shortcomings: when the narrative asks about the titular holiday, the postmaster tells him to go experience it for himself, "'for their ain't no use tryin' to describe it, you've got to see it'" ("SWD" 388). The subsequent narrative then presents itself as an attempt to contradict the postmaster's dictum by making readers "see" the events and characters without attending in the flesh.

<sup>68</sup> In "The Return of a Private," a husband's homecoming after the Civil War is savored through nonverbal communication: the "tenderness" of the reunited couple, "like that of a typical American family, found utterance in tones, rather than words" (*MTR* 129). In contrast, when Robert arrives in Wisconsin in "God's

Tones pack emotion into speech; they indicate affection or annoyance, sadness or boredom, and Garland locates in them a way to make readers feel the relations presented in his fiction.

In “A Branch Road,” a tale that allegorizes the local writer’s search for a voice, tone functions as a verbal property capable of both hindering and facilitating social communication. The narrative begins with a disembodied song that gradually materializes into Will Hannan: “In the windless September dawn a voice went ringing clear and sweet, a man’s voice, singing a cheap and common air. Yet something in the sound of it told he was young, jubilant, and a happy lover.” The voice assumes a tone, and as the sun rises—in one of Garland’s most color-splashed passages—a man “[comes] into view,” accreting “vague thoughts” and “great emotions” that finally localize in a name, spoken by a second traveler. The scene presents the emergence of a perceiver from a welter of sounds, colors, and feelings, and as the story progresses the narrator emphasizes the vocal tones that introduced the story, especially as they relate to Will’s budding courtship (*MTR* 5). “Will and Agnes had arrived at a tacit understanding of mutual love only the night before,” we are told, and the drama of the story is that of this tacit understanding breaking down and, after seven years, achieving a tentative repair (*MTR* 8).<sup>69</sup> In the first section, Will’s unfounded jealousy reaches a fever pitch when

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Ravens,” he alienates himself from the townspeople not by what he says but by how he says it: “Some way his tone was not right” (*MTR* 203).

<sup>69</sup> Miscommunication is one of Garland’s great themes. Many of the plots in *Main-Travelled Road* turn on misunderstandings, often, but not always, engendered by tone. “The Creamery Man,” like “A Branch Road,” treats a courtship in which poor communication and conflicting expectations threaten to cause heartache. When the main character decides to pursue Nina, his admirer, after realizing that Lucindy, his beloved, had rejected him, he remarks to himself, “Her [Nina’s] words meant what they stood for” (and this gives her an advantage over ‘Cindy) (*MTR* 160). “Up the Coolly” ends with an infamous miscommunication between Howard and Grant, in which the former’s offer of help—meaning money—is both accepted and refused, and the tragedy of “Under the Lion’s Paw” depends upon the ambiguity of terms Butler sets for Haskins’ lease. These stories, particularly the latter two, present narratives of failed



some fellow workers make reference to his crush. “It was not the words they said” that bothered him, “but the tones they used,” and these tones, in turn, provoke a more deadly shift in timbre: while threatening Bill Young with a pitchfork, Will’s “voice was low but terrific. There was a tone in it that made his own blood stop in his veins” (*MTR* 14). A series of mishaps deepens the misunderstanding between the young lovers, and Will leaves town after sending Agnes a letter that announces the foreclosure of speech (“I won’t say a word”) and the interruption of vision (“You won’t see me again”) (*MTR* 23).

Both language and perception are reawakened, and newly entwined, when Will returns home to convince a married Agnes to run away with him. The closing scene invests Will’s voice with an ability to conjure images that enhance and enliven the words he speaks, and Garland specifies this power as the focused and disciplined tone of the local color writer. When Will asks Agnes to leave her life of toil and join him in the East, his “vibrant voice call[s] up” “emotion” that finds expression in a physical response (“[s]he rose flushed, wild-eye, breathing hard”) rather than a linguistic one (“she could not speak”). “There was something hypnotic, dominating in his voice and eyes,” the narration continues, and as he pleads his case he strikes a tone that resonates with Agnes, prompting visions that recall the blue shadows of Garland’s color work: “Then she heard his words beneath his voice somehow, and they produced pictures that dazzled her. Luminous shadows moved before her eyes, driving across the gray background of her poor, starved, work-weary life” (*MTR* 141-42). Will’s speech becomes a magic lantern, casting colorful visions onto the barren walls of Agnes’s house. And though the force of the language begins as “dominating,” Will emerges as the “deliverer” whose “new and

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communication in the hopes that the frustration and unease they engender might provoke the reader to take the up causes they treat, namely, the single-tax platform associated with Henry George.

thrilling words” create new vistas for his auditor, enabling a forward momentum out of the stagnant situation of her toilsome life (*MTR* 43). His “voice and eyes” combine to create linguistic images tied to visual sensations that open a new path for action: in Will’s tone, Garland dramatizes the narrative goal of veritism as not only registering local color but also reshaping its arrangements, intensifying its harmonies.

When Will talks, he does not mirror Agnes’s surroundings or enshrine her prairie life as an existence “outside of time.” Nothing escapes the temporal flow when “metamorphosis is the law of all living things,” and Garland’s goal in his Midwestern stories is not to arrest the forces of modernization as they encroach upon the countryside, nor is it to celebrate rural life as either an antidote to the city or as just-so story about the nation’s past (*CI* 11). Rather, Garland’s regionalism mobilizes his impressionist method to draw out both the local colors that distinguish particular perspectives and the cultural forces that dim those elements, either through back-breaking labor or through the cultural homogenization bred by economic centralization. He writes not only to register difference but to extend differences, and in so doing he formulates a vision of America that resists the unifying, essence-based nation that critics of regionalist fiction now take for granted.<sup>70</sup> For Garland, America is an open and evolving network of fragmentary locales, a shifting composite that varies with the play of its parts. As such, only local color fiction can aspire to be truly national precisely because it alone eschews the project

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<sup>70</sup> Kaplan offers one of the most influential formulations of this tie between regionalism and nationalism in her essay “Nation, Region, Empire.” She argues that the “decentralization of literature” evidenced in the proliferation of regional subjects “contributes to solidifying national centrality by reimagining a distended industrial nation as an extended claim sharing a ‘common inheritance’ in its imagined rural origins” (251). Stephanie Foote, Judith Fetterley and Marjorie Pryse, and to a lesser extent Tom Lutz all understand regionalist fiction in the context of the centralization of America as it recovers from the Civil War and develops into an imperial power. My contention is that Garland’s critical and literary writing present an image of nationality as a patchwork of regions that rejects the notion of an organizing national essence and that indefinitely forestalls the project of totalization.

of speaking for everyone in favor of crafting a regional perspective that embraces its finitude, its embeddedness, as the conditions under which it contributes to an emergent and fluctuating nation. Garland insists: “local color means national character” (*CI* 53). In fiction, it is “the native element, the *differentiating* element,” the qualities of a style that forge an individual perception not from a pre-set difference but through a process of differentiation (*CI* 49). Such attunement to difference marks “the test of a national literature,” a literature that will be borne not by “an over-topping personality” but by “a multitude of loving artists” whose efforts unfold “the intimate social, individual life of the nation” (*CI* 26, 62). Individual life is always social, Garland asserts; like a color, it involves more than itself. Therefore, not until “individualism” becomes “the coloring element of a literature” will there “be association of equals” (*CI* 120). Democracy must be colorful.

Garland’s literary project thus extends the most radical aspects of Walt Whitman’s poetic portrait of America. “I read Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass*,” Garland reports, “and without doubt that volume changed the world for me”: it opened him onto a literary style able to insert itself into the fitful growth of the nation (*SMB* 251-52). To be sure, Whitman often aspires to a unified vision of the American spirit, but as Gilles Deleuze demonstrates in his short essay on the poet, such moments mark lapses from a more characteristic technique. “[W]hen Whitman speaks in his own manner and his own style,” Deleuze explains, “it turns out that a kind of whole must be constructed, a whole that is all the more paradoxical in that it only comes *after* the fragments and leaves them in tact, making no attempt to totalize them.”<sup>71</sup> The pragmatists give Whitman’s insight a

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<sup>71</sup> Gilles Deleuze, “Whitman,” in *Essays Critical and Clinical*, trans. Daniel W. Smith and Michael A. Greco (Minneapolis, MN: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1997), 58, emphasis in original. Hereafter cited as

philosophical meaning: “relations are external to their terms” (“W” 58). The process of writing involves instituting those relations through a process of selection, which in turn produces a Whole that varies according to the arrangement of its parts. Nature itself is “the process of establishing relations” and the invention of relational compounds constitutes “the very condition of evolution.” To illustrate this process, which yokes literary practice and evolutionary change, Deleuze, like Garland, turns to colors. He observes that the “relations between colors are made up of contrasts and complementarities, never given but always new, and Whitman no doubt fabricated one of the most coloristic of literatures that could have ever existed” (“W” 59). One of the most coloristic, that is, until Garland. For Garland made color relations a pillar of his prose, both a subject of description and a model for how writing might create fragments that break free of a predetermined Whole. His stories render the individuating colors of the Middle Border to foster a national literature comprised of interlocking perspectives and transactional impressions.<sup>72</sup>

Is it not clear then why Garland clung to the phrase “local color”? And why critics lose much when they abandon it for the more respectable “regionalism”? A writer attuned to the shifting valences of “local color” as it migrated from art to literature, Garland found in color a technique for addressing a knotty set of aesthetic and political

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“W.” Deleuze opposes this practice of assembling fragments without totalizing them with the “European” tendency to “place[] the Idea of the Whole *beforehand*” and to subsume the fragments into a greater, more perfect One (58).

<sup>72</sup> If Whitman stands as Garland’s predecessor in this regard, Alain Locke emerges as his successor. In *Race Contacts and Interracial Relations* (1916) and later in “The New Negro” (1925), Locke presents a view of racial identity as the product of both cultural and social relations; he rejects the idea of racial essences but recognizes the singular and real properties of the subject positions forged at any particular place and time. Like Garland, Locke calls for writers to realize the perspectives that issue from these historical selves in the hopes of molding the types of identities that will be possible in the future. He challenges readers to understand racial identity not as a complete fiction or as a biological fact but as a work in progress, something that literature and the arts help coax into new realms of becoming.

problems about representation, identity, and the uses of a national literature. In his comments on Impressionism, he praises the shifting, relational hues of Monet and Renoir as the visual indexes of our perceptual openness to the environment, and his stories investigate the complexities of this openness as it unfolds among the exigencies and tendencies of a particular social space. He inverts the “self color” assumed by early-nineteenth-century painting into a color-self, an identity both singular and networked, a self that isn’t self-contained.<sup>73</sup> Among these selves, Garland casts blue shadows that specify the mix of conceptual and material practice that drives his veritism and undergirds his understanding of how a literary impression takes hold in the world. In short, color provides Garland with both the aesthetic tools and the empirical framework to bring literature to a “radical change in attitude toward the physical universe”; it ushers his art into a relational, embodied modernity. Garland forges these techniques through the colors of painting, and he directs them at the lives and landscapes within “the interior of America” (*CI* 9). Yet the language of relational color extended beyond the canvases of high art to encompass the walls on which they were hung, and as we will see in the next chapter, the affective tones of home decoration led Charlotte Perkins Gilman to craft a literary style that extends Garland’s interest in tone. Thus, we now move from the national to the domestic interior.

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<sup>73</sup> Deleuze describes such a self when he compares the fragmentary American identity to the concept of a unified identity regnant in Europe: “the Self [*Moi*] of the Anglo-Saxons, always splintered, fragmentary, and relative, is opposed to the substantial, total, and solipsistic I [*Je*] of the Europeans” (“W” 57).

## CHAPTER TWO

### **Red, Blue, Green, and Yellow Wallpaper: Charlotte Perkins Gilman and the Color Schemes of Late-Nineteenth-Century Design**

After thirty-five years of critical investigations into the contexts and connotations of the “repellant, almost revolting” hue in Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s “The Yellow Wall-Paper” (1892), the famous nursery-turned-prison boasts more yellows than the Pantone catalogue.<sup>1</sup> A quick flip through the pages of criticism on the story yields an array of possible shades, each with its own historical or psychological referent. Cultural options include Yellow Journalism or the Yellow Peril; aesthetic alternatives range from the wallpapers of William Morris and the yellow-backed books of French Decadence to the sunflower in Oscar Wilde’s lapel; and in the psychoanalytic category there are shades of “saturated urine” and of “a child’s feces” that mark a “fear of motherhood.”<sup>2</sup> This

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<sup>1</sup> Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *“The Yellow Wallpaper” and Selected Stories*. Ed. and intro., Denise D. Knight (Newark: Univ. of Delaware Press, 1994), 5. Further citations to Gilman’s short stories refer to this volume and are cited parenthetically.

<sup>2</sup> Sari Edelstein, “Charlotte Perkins Gilman and the Yellow Newspaper,” *Legacy* 24.1 (2007): 74; Susan Lanser, “Feminist Criticism, ‘The Yellow Wallpaper,’ and the Politics of Color in America,” *Feminist Studies* 15.3, *Feminist Reinterpretations/Reinterpretations of Feminism* (autumn 1989), 425; Heather Kirk Thomas, “[A] kind of ‘debased Romanesque’ with *delirium tremens*”: Late-Victorian Wall Coverings and Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s ‘The Yellow Wall-Paper’” in Catherine J. Golden and Joanna Schneider Zangrando, *The Mixed Legacy of Charlotte Perkins Gilman* (Newark: Univ. of Delaware Press, 2000), 189; Ann Heilman, “Overwriting Decadence: Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Oscar Wilde, and the Feminization of Art in ‘The Yellow Wall-Paper,’” in Golden and Zangrando, *The Mixed Legacy of Charlotte Perkins Gilman*, 177; William Veeder, “Who is Jane? The Intricate Feminism of Charlotte Perkins Gilman,” *Arizona Quarterly*, 44.3 (autumn 1988): 65; Ann J. Lane, *To Herland and Beyond: The Life and Work of*

diversity of yellows owes much to Susan Lanser's 1989 argument that "in privileging the questions of reading and writing as essential 'woman questions,' feminist criticism has been led to the [wall]paper while suppressing the politically charged adjective that colors it" (425).<sup>3</sup> Elaborations of the various political and historical charges that energize the yellow moved Gilman scholarship away from its initial emphasis on interpretation and textuality—centered largely around readings of the wallpaper's script-like pattern—and towards a recognition of Gilman's "mixed legacy," her Progressive-era blend of gender critique and eugenic nationalism.<sup>4</sup> This shift produced the many colors mentioned above, each one denoting a particular historical context for yellow intended to illuminate Gilman's political and aesthetic projects.

So many shades, so many attempts to reveal what Gilman's yellow stands for, what it means. But what if the wallpaper's hideous shades don't stand for anything? What if—like the text's oscillating yellows, oranges, and "sickly sulphur"—they don't

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*Charlotte Perkins Gilman* (New York: Pantheon, 1990), 129; and Catherine Golden, *The Yellow Wallpaper: A Sourcebook and Critical Edition* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 77.

<sup>3</sup> Lanser, "Feminist Criticism, 'The Yellow Wallpaper,' and the Politics of Color in America," 425. Lanser's critique insists that feminist critics have reduced all feminine writing and experience to a model of white womanhood, and her turn to the "politics of color" presents a way of thinking through the intersectionality of race and gender. Julia Bates Dock, with Daphne Ryan Allen, Jennifer Palais, and Kristen Tracy, offers a similar intervention into feminist interpretations of the story by noting that the "[t]he struggle to gain a foothold for women writers in literary studies and in the academy often took precedence over textual criticism and archival research into letters and reviews." Julia Bates Dock *et al.*, "'But One Expects That': Charlotte Perkins Gilman's 'The Yellow Wallpaper' and the Shifting Light of Scholarship," *PMLA* 111.1 *The Status of Evidence* (January 1996), 53. Both Lanser and Dock demonstrate how certain critical presuppositions shaped early readings of Gilman's story; likewise, I am arguing that the recent emphasis on Gilman's nationalist and racist positions, alongside the critical tendency to turn colors into symbols for other things, have kept critics from recognizing the interpretive and political stakes of the wallpaper's yellow.

<sup>4</sup> For a review of how critics have taken up Lanser's challenge to acknowledge the eugenicist strands of Gilman's thought, see Catherine J. Golden's and Joanna Schneider Zangrando's introduction to their edited collection, *The Mixed Legacy of Charlotte Perkins Gilman*. For an especially astute treatment of this issue, one that investigates how the "coterminous ideologies of feminism and eugenics" mutually supported one another at the turn of the century, see Dana Seitler's *Atavistic Tendencies: The Culture of Science in American Modernity* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2008), 178.

even *stand still* (5)? Indeed, such shifting and a-signifying colors populate late-nineteenth-century discourses of interior design. Both in theoretical treatises and in practical manuals for the amateur home decorator, colors functioned less as symbols for a particular attribute, image, or style and more as sensory qualities able to regulate the “mood” of a room, as “keynotes” capable of bringing all the elements of an interior into harmonious relation. To be sure, these discussions encompassed claims for what individual hues were supposed to do, but the variety of accounts in this area—like the many explanations for Gilman’s yellow—serves primarily to underscore color’s slippery and non-localizable properties rather than to establish any one code for color effects. Late-nineteenth-century designers treated reds, blues, and yellows alike as material constituents of a room’s affective atmosphere, elements that wielded a palpable yet non-conscious influence on inhabitants and that gained their significance only through the relations they formed with one another and with other aspects of the room. The status of color *as such* in design thus provides a historical context for “The Yellow Wall-Paper” different from those listed above: instead of treating yellow as a signifier for a larger cultural network—a mere occasion to consider a broader conjuncture between Gilman and her times—it insists on color itself as a dynamic site of historical debate both about the interactions between individuals and environments and about the social and literary techniques for managing such relations.

To grasp the color of “The Yellow Wall-Paper,” then, we must situate it within turn-of-the-century debates about color in general and not just in terms of the historical meanings or uses of yellow. The design reform movement emphasized color’s relational and affective qualities, and Gilman’s writing adopts images and ideas from this arena to



address her abiding concerns with the effects of domestic interiors on the mental lives of housewives. In both her sociological and literary work, she engages the paired anxiety and excitement about color's sensory effects: the fear that color might silently invade the home and unsettle its inhabitants, and the promise that with proper management these same hues might create more peaceful and productive environments. As such, Gilman's colors address concerns over the arrangement of social spaces and relations, and stories such as "Dr. Clair's Place" (1915) imagine ways of bringing color's unruly elements—so vividly dramatized in "The Yellow Wall-Paper"—under conscious direction. Design reform discourse constellates these sorts of concerns about social interactions with discussions of perceptual experience and the artistic arrangements of physical space. Far from bracketing or eclipsing questions of reading and interpretation, then, the colors of Gilman's fiction reveal the social and affective backdrops that surround and shape all aesthetic engagements.

### **The Alhambra and the Vatican**

In "The Cottagette" (1910), one of Gilman's many portrayals of a reformed domestic setting made conducive to artistic production, the narrator describes her embroidery in language that defined the contentious terrain of design reform at the end of the century: when "making designs [. . .] from flowers and leaves and things" around her, she explains, she would "conventionalize them sometimes, and sometimes paint them just as they are,—in soft silk stitches" (132). Representation and conventionalization: these terms constituted the two sides of the decoration debate, and the story of modern design is largely that of the movement from the former to the latter. Situated between the mid-

Victorian delight in illusory ornamentation and the austere modernist doctrine that “form follows function” (or that ornament is crime), the Art Design period of the 1880s and 1890s hailed the aesthetic effects of abstract patterns and color against both naturalistic representations and unadorned functionalism. Gilman’s early education and employment set her squarely in the midst of these debates; her own “flower-portraiture” (performed in water colors rather than stitches) gained her admission into the Rhode Island School of Design, and this training led to her jobs as a drawing instructor, an advertising artist for her cousin’s soap company, and an interior design consultant for the Pasadena Opera House.<sup>5</sup> Though never an unquestioning adherent to the new trends in art design, Gilman absorbed the terms and tools of this milieu and applied them to questions of language and affect, of the tonal background of linguistic mimesis.

If eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century consumers delighted in the detailed and deceptive ornamentation of everyday items—a lamp shaped as an ostrich, a wall-hanging depicting an Alpine view—late-nineteenth-century designers condemned such practices as vulgar and promoted stylized compositions of form and color as the proper domain of the decorative arts. Ernest Fenollosa, the Eastern Art enthusiast whose writings on Chinese poetry so impacted Ezra Pound, recalls the transition to art design with tongue in cheek: at mid-century, he explains, “we made the astounding discovery that full oil paintings in shadow and perspective were not the best sort of ornament to put upon our saucers and cups.”<sup>6</sup> Instead of representing, designers should conventionalize:

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<sup>5</sup> Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *The Living of Charlotte Perkins Gilman* (New York: Appleton-Century, 1935), 45-47, 112.

<sup>6</sup> Qtd. in E. H. Gombrich, *The Sense of Order: A Study in the Psychology of Decorative Art* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell Univ. Press), 59. Fenollosa’s comments appear in the March/April 1896 issue of *The Lotus* under the title “The Nature of Fine Art.”

this principle runs throughout design manuals and treatises of the time and finds an influential formulation—one that informs Gilman’s “The Cottage” —in Charles Eastlake’s *Hints on Household Taste in Furniture, Upholstery, and Other Details* (1867). “The art of the decorator is to *typify*, not to represent, the works of Nature,” Eastlake explains, “and it is just this difference between artistic abstraction and pseudo-realisms which separates good and noble design from that which is commonplace and bad.”<sup>7</sup> According to such standards, the artistic designer deals in abstractions and stylizations, not in imitations, and this rejection of verisimilitude, undergirded by both industrial and psychological developments, led decorators to embrace color and pattern in their “pure” forms.

Art decoration is inseparable from industrialization. Not only do its most characteristic wallpaper designs, in the words of William Morris, “accept their mechanical nature frankly” and employ the new range of synthetic colorants, but also the institutional support for design reform—design schools, the South Kensington Museum (now the Victoria and Albert)—arose from the enthusiasm generated by the Crystal Palace Exhibition in London (1851) and the Centennial Exhibition in Philadelphia (1876).<sup>8</sup> Art historian E. H. Gombrich argues that the increased influence of the products showcased at these exhibitions created the need for a design theory that demarcated

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<sup>7</sup> Charles Eastlake, *Hints on Household Taste: The Classic Handbook of Victorian Interior Decoration* ([1868] New York: Dover, 1986). Eastlake’s design manual went through six editions in America and remained an influential text throughout the time of Gilman’s schooling and early career. McCorquodale, *History of the Interior* (New York, Vendome Press, 1983), 184.

<sup>8</sup> Qtd. in E. A. Entwisle, *A Literary History of Wallpaper* (London: B. T. Batsford, LTD, 1960), 124. Entwisle quotes from *The Lesser Arts of Life* (1882). For the importance of the Crystal Palace Exhibition in the development of design reform, see Gombrich, *The Sense of Order*, 36, and Charlotte Gere, with Lesley Hoskins, *The House Beautiful: Oscar Wilde and the Aesthetic Interior*, 21. For the Philadelphia Centennial Exhibition and its relation to the founding of American design schools in the 1870s and 1880s, see Thomas, “LWC,” 191.

“between the fine arts, which should imitate natural appearances, and the industrial arts, which should avoid that trap.” In articulating this distinction, one that “had never been attempted in the past,” artists and decorators alike began to characterize the practice of design “as an abstract play with pure forms” and colors (SO 37). Where the hues of the fine arts served the ends of imitation, the colors of design were “pure,” un beholden to lines or life-like images.

Once extracted from the representational imperatives of painting, color and form took on psychological valences as the sensory and perceptual stimuli through which designers affected their audiences. To be sure, previous decoration manuals had called homemakers to create “restful” interiors, and artists had long been aware of the various effects of color and line, but as designers embraced conventionalized patterns and hues as their unique domain they increased their appeals to the psychological and physiological effects of a room’s decorative elements. Owen Jones first couched design principles in explicitly psychological terms in *The Grammar of Ornament* (1856), a standard in the field for decades after its publication, and followers such as Christopher Dresser, an industrial designer trained as a botanist, extended this connection into the realm of evolutionary psychology and physiology (SO 51).<sup>9</sup> As the century drew to a close, the domestic interior and the psychological laboratory increasingly fed into one another; designers cited the color experiments of psychologists to substantiate their advice, and scientists attempted to isolate and to understand the sensations produced by well- or badly-crafted rooms. This cross-pollination of science and art in the practice of design

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<sup>9</sup> Christopher Dresser, *The Art of Decorative Design* (London: Day and Son, 1862; reprint by The American Life Foundation, Library of Victorian Culture). Dresser’s goal in this book was to reveal “the teachings of nature upon the subject of adaptation, and the application of these teachings in the case of decoration” (163).

encouraged an understanding of color as a sensory element to which the human organism, as a result of its evolutionary history, responds in visceral and powerful ways. Loosed from the meaning-making shapes of images, color and pattern in the late-nineteenth century provided sites through which our perceptual interactions with the sensory world could be analyzed and, in the lab of the interior, arranged.<sup>10</sup>

In trading representational art for conventionalized compositions, then, designers crafted a conception of color and of pattern as self-subsistent entities with traceable influences on minds and bodies. Far from marking a rejection of realism, these stylized elements of artistic design were fashioned in the pursuit of a more honest realism, a mode that recognizes its own materiality (the flatness of wallpapers) and pursues the real experiences this medium can provoke. In Eastlake's terms, "artistic abstraction" trumps "pseudo-realisms." The scenic view wallpapers of the early-nineteenth-century failed because they denied their material character;<sup>11</sup> "[s]ince a wall is a flat surface," Helen Binkerd Young explained in a correspondence course on "Household Decoration" (1911), "designs should be flatly represented." Instead of a "natural rose or an actual grape vine crawling through an actual trellis," decorators should select papers that "suggest [. . .] the idea of a rose or other growth adapted to use on a flat surface."<sup>12</sup> In his 1882 lecture on home decoration in America, Oscar Wilde notes the unsettling quality of

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<sup>10</sup> As Gombrich notes, "[i]t was in the field of colour that the psychological laws of perceptual interaction were first studied with scientific rigour" (SO 142). For the historical connections between psychology and color theory in art and design, see also Gage, *Color and Meaning*, 191-94.

<sup>11</sup> Jean Zuber's designs, popular between 1813 and 1836, are characteristic of the wide, non-repeating scenes depicted on wallpapers in the early part of the century and sold with names such as "Scenes from Italy" and "Spanish Gardens." For descriptions of these wallpapers, see McCorquodale, *History of the Interior*, 172.

<sup>12</sup> Helen Binkard Young, "Household Decoration," *Cornell Reading Courses* 1, no. 5 (December 1, 1911), 47.

these false designs with characteristic wit: “we do not want a soup-plate whose bottom seems to vanish in the distance,” he explains; “[o]ne feels neither safe nor comfortable under such conditions.”<sup>13</sup> These reforms—emerging from the industrial and scientific contexts of the nineteenth century—initially served to mark the distinctive terrain of the designer and to consecrate this realm as “artistic,” but as the century drew to a close painters began to reconceive of their work in terms of design.<sup>14</sup> “[A] painting should be an ornament,” Maurice Denis declared in 1893; like James McNeil Whistler before him, he insisted that “the choice of subjects for scenes means nothing” and that “[i]t is through coloured surfaces, through the value of tones, through the harmony of lines, that I attempt to reach the mind and arouse the emotions” (qtd. in *SO* 58). As artists become decorators, painting becomes modern. And as the new form of realism promised by artistic abstraction grew into modernist art and aesthetics, questions of mimesis shifted to the interplay of affective, sensory, and representational elements of an artwork, be it painting or poem, sonata or novel (*SO* 62).

As a hotbed for modernist ideas and as a child of environmental psychology and progressive era optimism about industry, late-nineteenth-century design reform reflects many of the distinctive attributes of Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s sociological thought and literary practice. Readers have long noted the presence of design terminology in “The Yellow Wall-Paper” (“I know a little of the principle of design,” the narrator boasts), and critics such as Polly Wynn Allen and Cynthia Davis have provided helpful accounts of

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<sup>13</sup> Oscar Wilde, *Decorative Art in America: A Lecture by Oscar Wilde together with Letters, Reviews, and Interviews*, ed. and intro. by Richard Butler Glaenzer. (New York: Brentano’s, 1906), 11.

<sup>14</sup> For an example of how designers were raised to the status of artists, take Richard George Hatton’s introduction to *Design: an exposition of the principles and practices of the making of patterns* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1902): Hatton argues that the “strong desire among persons of taste for plain objects” of simple pattern and good color “[l]ifted” the decorative arts into a “more exalted region” and that, as a result, “the works of the decorator become more definitely works of Art” (unpaginated preface).

how Gilman understands the political significance of interior spaces.<sup>15</sup> But we might go even further than previous critics and suggest that some of the defining elements of Gilman's career—her “domestic determinism,” her interests in bringing the home into modern industrial age, and her blend of sensational and didactic literary techniques—came to her in germ at the Rhode Island School of Design and matured as she continued to follow debates about design and decoration. To do so would be to reverse the familiar critical trajectory that explains Gilman's interiors with her environmental determinism and to place greater emphasis on the terms and problems Gilman inherited from decoration.<sup>16</sup> She certainly knew the discourse. In *The Home*, she praises the “new employments” through which design specialists “apply their talents to the selection and arrangement of ‘artistic interiors’ ready-made for the purchaser,” and she references the “[w]hole magazines [. . .], articles unnumbered, books not a few, and courses of lectures” that “are devoted to this end.”<sup>17</sup> To these many texts that wrestle with questions of representation and artistic abstraction in the context of environmental and social effects, Gilman adds her fiction.

### Color Unspoiled

Contemporary reviewers of “The Yellow Wall-Paper” directed their attention to the narrative's potential effects; they either celebrated or condemned the story according

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<sup>15</sup> Cynthia J. Davis, *Bodily and Narrative Forms: The Influence of Medicine on American Literature* (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 2000); Polly Wynn Allen, *Building Domestic Liberty: Charlotte Perkins Gilman's Architectural Feminism* (Amherst: Univ. of Massachusetts Press, 1988).

<sup>16</sup> For examples of critics who read Gilman's domestic interiors in light of her “domestic determinism” or her “engag[ement] with contemporary theories about the physiological influence of domestic spaces,” see Davis, 133, and Jane F. Thraikill, *Affecting Fictions: Mind, Body, and Emotion in American Literary Realism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 2007), 130.

<sup>17</sup> Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *The Home: Its Work and Influence* [1903], 143. Hereafter cited as *H*.

to what they thought it did to readers. Horace Scudder famously refused to publish the piece in *The Atlantic Monthly* because he did not want to “[make] others as miserable as I did myself”; William Dean Howells praised the tale for the “shiver[s]” it gave him; another review fretted the “sensational style” that “hold[s] the reader in morbid fascination to the end” and wondered “if such literature should be permitted in print.”<sup>18</sup> Other reviewers hailed the story’s vivid rendering of madness and encouraged its circulation as a prophylactic against the perpetuation of unnecessary nervousness—and indeed Gilman herself envisioned such a medical mission for her story.<sup>19</sup> Still another reviewer took a different tack. While praising the tale as a “suggestive study in neuroticism,” the writer of “A Question of ‘Nerves’” (1899) proposed that Gilman’s readership may be prompted not only to reconsider Dr. Mitchell’s rest cure, but also to redecorate: “After reading [‘The Yellow Wall-Paper’],” the reviewer proclaims, “the model husband will be inclined seriously to consider the subject of repapering his wife’s bed chamber according to the ethics of William Morris.”<sup>20</sup> In addition to signaling an overlap between nineteenth-century medical treatments and decorative practices, this contemporary response situates the stylistic innovations of Gilman’s story within a general “ethic” of design reform. Such an ethic promoted a conception of color as an

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<sup>18</sup> Gilman, *The Living of Charlotte Perkins Gilman*, 119-21; Golden, *Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s “The Yellow Wall-Paper”: A Sourcebook and Critical Edition*, 81-82.

<sup>19</sup> In “Why I Wrote ‘The Yellow Wallpaper?’” (1913), Gilman says of the story, “[i]t was not intended to drive people crazy, but to save people from being driven crazy, and it worked” (332).

<sup>20</sup> Golden, *Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s “The Yellow Wall-Paper”: A Sourcebook and Critical Edition*, 83. This review contradicts Heather Kirk Thomas’s claims that Gilman’s fictional wallpaper “authentically delineates Morris’s fashionable gilded olive, monochromatic yellow, and khaki Craftsman designs” and that “The Yellow Wall-Paper” employs these figures to critique “the male take over and sequential androgynization of the decorative arts market” (189, 190). Against the readings of Thomas and Ann Heilman, each of which posits an antagonistic relation between Gilman and aestheticism, I am arguing that Gilman appropriated many techniques and ideas from the realm of art design and that these similarities—as well as the productive tensions they produce—might be better framed through an investigation of color in general than through the particular valences of “The Yellow Nineties.”



atmospheric assembly of felt relations, and Gilman adopted this “nervous” notion of color—this application of hues for their affective rather than symbolic properties—to explore the qualitative arena in which reading and interpretation occur.

Once the pictorial and imitative images that had so long filled middle- and upper-class homes were evacuated from acceptable design practices, color and form took center stage, playing related but distinct roles in the development of modern decoration. The two almost always appear as a pair—form and color, *designo* and *colore*, the former acting on the mind and the latter appealing to the body. Yet in their modified roles at the end of the nineteenth century, color, which had generally been subservient to line, assumed priority as the design element most in tune with the principles of artistic abstraction that played upon the human senses. Of course, pattern too carried the capacity to upset or to calm, and its relation to repose and to restfulness placed it within the psychological aesthetics of design. The extreme cases have drawn the most attention: elaborate and convoluted patterns were thought to have an especially deleterious influence on invalids and the bed-ridden, domestic sufferers unable to halt the instinctive compulsion to follow the paths blazed by the design. Charles Eastlake again puts the point in terms Gilman would later adopt when he wonders “[h]ow many an unfortunate invalid has lain helpless on his bed, condemned to puzzle out the pattern of the hangings over his head, or stare at a wall which he feels instinctively obliged to map out into grass-plots, gravel-paths, and summer-houses, like an involuntary landscape gardener?”<sup>21</sup> As

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<sup>21</sup> Eastlake, *Hints on Household Taste*, 206. In the same year, John Masury offered a similar image of compulsion, one that would have appealed to Gilman’s own belief that the rest cure failed to provide women with restorative work: “An invalid lying in bed in some of our paper rooms,” he laments, “with no mental occupation but that of tracing the figures on the walls, will be forced to hide his head beneath the bedclothes to escape the appalling images which his diseased fancy will have conjured out of the ill-regulated designs and patterns which, in spite of himself, meet his gaze, turn whichever way he may.” John

this passage makes clear, patterns and forms impose themselves on the imagination and the representational faculties; they play upon the “imaginative power and habit of story-making” that John hopes to dampen in the narrator (7). It is no wonder then that critics concerned with explicating the interpretive rubric or practices in “The Yellow Wall-Paper” have gravitated to the design’s form and the narrator’s insistence that she “*will* follow that pointless pattern to some sort of conclusion” (9).<sup>22</sup>

Although this appeal to our pattern-following and story-making habit is couched in the physiological language of compulsion and instinct, form cannot attain the freedom from imitation to which the decorative arts aspired. It always relates to processes of meaning production. For this reason, color constitutes the privileged domain of many design reformers. Its distance from representation and its connection to the emotions made it especially suited to the needs of artistic abstraction, and just as Whistler and the Impressionists claimed color as the lever needed to turn painting away from narrative and moralizing pictures and towards experiments in composition, the first truly abstract painters in America announced their commitment to pure color in their name: the synchromists.<sup>23</sup> Likewise, designers at the end of the nineteenth century favored color as

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Masury, *How Shall We Paint Our Houses? A Popular Treatise on the Art of House Painting: Plain and Decorative* (New York: D. Appleton & Co., 1868), 161.

<sup>22</sup> The preference for pattern holds across almost all studies of “The Yellow Wall-Paper” interested in issues of interpretation and textuality. Susan Lanser discusses six such essays that have especial relevance for feminist criticism, including work by Elaine Hedges, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, Annette Kolodny, and Paula Treichler; for a somewhat different approach, one that focuses on historical reading practices rather than writing techniques, see Barbara Hochman, “The Reading Habit and “The Yellow Wallpaper,” *American Literature* 74.1 (2002): 89-110.

<sup>23</sup> In 1912, Stanton MacDonald-White and Morgan Russell coined the term “synchromism”—literally, “colors together”—to name their paintings of color harmony and relations. The Synchromists pursued the analogies between color and sound, and their name is meant to recall the harmonies and tones of a symphony. For more on the synchromist movement, see William C. Agee’s *Synchromism and Color Principles in American Painting, 1910-1930* [Exhibition] October 12-November 6, 1965 (New York: M.

a decorative component with deep connections to our physical bodies, one that eluded any fixed or definite meaning. “Mere colour,” writes Oscar Wilde in “The Critic as Artist” (1891), “*unspoiled by meaning, and unallied with definite form*, can speak to the soul in a thousand different ways,” and only the decorative arts can muster such tones to “create[] in us both mood and temperament.”<sup>24</sup> Where Wilde delighted in the powerful ambiguity of pure hues, other design reformers stressed the physiological need emerging from “our instinctive love for color”: “color is to many temperaments like food to the hungry: it satisfies as insistent a demand of the mind as food does to the body.”<sup>25</sup> By reading the yellow of “The Yellow Wall-Paper” as a hue resonant with the mood-producing qualities attributed to color in general by late-nineteenth-century design, we will see Gilman developing a blend of pattern-like representation and colorful atmospheric effects to fashion a literary style attentive—and respondent—to the interactions between individuals and their environments.

Late in “The Yellow Wall-Paper,” the narrator distinguishes her own engagement with the wallpaper from the influence it has over the others in the house, and in so doing she provides a model for parsing the pattern from the color. “It only interests me,” she says of the wallpaper, “but I feel sure John and Jennie are secretly affected by it” (16).

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Knoedler & Co., 1965) and Gail Levin’s *Synchromism and American Color Abstraction, 1910-1925* (New York: G. Braziller, 1978).

<sup>24</sup> Oscar Wilde, “The Critic as Artist” [1891], in *The Artist as Critic, Critical Writings of Oscar Wilde*, ed. Richard Ellmann (New York: Random House, 1968), 398, emphasis added. Wilde’s aesthetic doctrine owes much to both Walter Pater and to Whistler. In his Oxford tutor’s *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* (1873), Wilde read that “[i]n its primary aspect, a great picture has no more definite message for us than an accidental play of sunlight and shadow for a moment,” and this language—tweaked to emphasize color—reappears in Wilde’s first lecture in America: “In its primary aspect a painting has no more spiritual message or meaning than an exquisite fragment of Venetian glass . . . it is a beautiful coloured surface, nothing more.” Walter Pater, *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry* ([1873] Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1998), 84; Wilde, “The English Renaissance in Art,” qtd. in Birgit Borelius, “Oscar Wilde, Whistler and Colours,” *Scripta Minora* 3 (1966-67), 24.

<sup>25</sup> Candace Wheeler, “The Decoration of Walls,” *The Outlook* 52 (November 2, 1895), 705.

Forms require conscious—even if involuntary—interaction; colors, like the narrator, work in secret. This interest in the unconscious influence of domestic interiors emerges from the belief in color’s mood-producing power and appears—both in popular discourse and in Gilman’s story—as an attunement to the *atmosphere* of a room. “When we enter certain houses,” reports a *New York Times* article at the turn of the century, “we are immediately affected by their air.”<sup>26</sup> Gilman gives this recognition a double valence in her story: on the one hand, John insists on the upstairs room for his wife’s convalescence because its many windows give her “all the air [she] could get”; “‘Your exercise depends on your strength, my dear,’ said he, ‘and your food somewhat on your appetite; but air you can absorb all the time’” (5). On the other, the narrator experiences the room’s atmosphere not as a quality of respiration but as a tone produced by its physical surroundings. The *New York Times* writer continues, suggesting the difference between the color-sensitive narrator and her husband, “the pleasant or disagreeable impression in the tone of the physical surroundings” is determined by “this or that color, or combination of colors,” though the average person rarely considers this influence.<sup>27</sup> For the narrator, and for late-nineteenth-century design discourse, the atmosphere of a room emerges from the arrangement of its colors, and this pervasive and non-localized influence occurs because colors are not *about* anything, in the sense of referencing some meaning or external object. Instead, they move *about* a house in the diffuse manner of

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<sup>26</sup> Charles de Kay, “Colors and the Mind,” *New York Times* 9 May 1901: BR9.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid. Helen Binkerd Young makes a similar observation about the unconscious influence of interior colors that wield physical effects on unwitting occupants: “Consciously or otherwise,” Young says of bright colors, “we react to their influence, and sensitive women have been known to pay the price of one headache a week for a red paper” (“HD” 46). Candace Wheeler concurs and offers another picture of a color-casualty: “Often the unlucky householder does not know why he suffers from this affliction, and it is only by the education of unrest that he learns to shun the strongly colored, strongly printed, ignorantly designed wall-paper” (“DW” 705).

the narrator's observation that "there is something strange about the house—I can feel it" (4). John's response to his wife's grievance—"he said what I felt was a *draught* and closed the window" (4)—reduces a pervasive, affective force to a particular, localized cause. He gets it right in so far as he relates the feeling of the room to its "air," but he goes astray when he attributes that atmosphere to an outside rather than an immanent influence. Like so many unknowing occupants of badly-colored rooms, John fails to recognize the connection between atmosphere and color, between the tone of the interior and the hues of the wallpaper, because he conceives of color as a static entity rather than a set of relations.

Gilman imagines color as an atmospheric effect, a tone established through harmonies and juxtapositions that pervades an environment without being reducible to any one portion of it. Her story adapts decorative discourse on the unconscious influence of walls to experiment with the literary production of mood through textual tone, what Sianne Ngai thinks of as "a materially created semblance of feeling that nonetheless dissolves into static when one attempts [. . .] to break it down into isolated parts."<sup>28</sup> The yellow of the story—like the strange feeling "about" the house—reconfigures traditional notions of reference, and models a quality of writing that is both "materially created" and yet fully dispersed within the texture of the prose. It is more feeling than imitation. In this regard, critics of "The Yellow Wall-Paper" are absolutely right to focus on the story's theorization of reading and interpretation. But they limit themselves when they explore this topic exclusively in terms of pattern. The unique contribution of Gilman's story comes in its investigation of the colorful background of all pattern-following, the tonal atmosphere that pervades a text and shapes its associations and narrative attention.

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<sup>28</sup> Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 2005), 81.

Normally relegated to the background and left—like interior colors—to be experienced unconsciously, the tonal weather of literature takes center stage in “The Yellow Wall-Paper,” and Gilman figures this meditation primarily in terms of color. To arrive at the tone of “The Yellow Wall-Paper,” then, we must further examine the atmosphere of that yellow room.

As a quality of an interior atmosphere and as a site of interaction between an individual and an environment, Gilman’s colors shine—they emerge from the play of light on a textured surface, and they shimmer with the changing sun. “The Yellow Wall-Paper” links light to the walls of the nursery throughout the story, and at each point this connection infuses color with movement. It is as light that color creeps. The narrator’s first comments on the wallpaper pack the description with adjectives that imply action, and these culminate in the marks made on the walls by the sun: “[t]he color is repellant, almost revolting; a smouldering unclean yellow, strangely faded by the slow-turning sunlight” (5). This acidic sun has turned the once-uniform yellow into an array of half-tones: the greenish-yellow of “sulphur” in some places, a pale yellowish (“lurid”) orange in others (5). It’s as if the sun’s rays had coaxed the material color back to its primary status as light waves, bending the wallpaper’s hue towards each side of the spectrum and pressing it back into what the narrator imagines as “great slanting waves of optic horror” (9). Light gives the wallpaper its color, and through one of Gilman’s puns it even provides the pattern with its sole coherent principle of design: soon after noting that the pattern “was not arranged on any laws of radiation, or alternation, or repetition, or symmetry, or anything else that [she] ever heard of,” the narrator remarks that at one point in the room, “where the crosslights fade and the low sun shines directly upon” the

wallpaper, she “can almost fancy radiation after all” (9). Radiation: though the narrator ostensibly refers to the ways in which “the interminable grotesque seem to form around a common centre,” the word more directly refers to the effects of the crosslights and low sun that hit the paper and makes it move (10). Of course the paper radiates in that spot; it’s mingled with the sun.

As the story progresses, the narrator pays closer and closer attention to the light’s effects on the wallpaper, eventually collapsing the substance of the paper with the appearance of the lights. “There is one marked peculiarity about this paper,” she declares, “a thing nobody seems to notice but myself, and that is that it changes as the light changes” (12). She follows this revelation with a litany of observations about the shifting wallpaper and its conditions: “When the sun shoots in through the east window [. . .] it changes so quickly that I never can quite believe it”; “By moonlight [. . .] I wouldn’t know it was the same paper” (13).<sup>29</sup> The protean nature of the narrator’s studies provides the context for the fabrication of the imprisoned woman behind the paper’s pattern, and the investigation into the woman’s predicament proceeds according to the changing lights: “At night in any kind of light, in twilight, candlelight, lamplight, and worst of all by moonlight, [the pattern] becomes bars!”; “By daylight [the woman] is subdued”; “in the very bright spots she keeps still, and in the very shady spots she takes hold of the bars and shakes them hard” (13, 15). The narrator reads her condition into the paper within

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<sup>29</sup> Though I am not interested in making specific claims for how Gilman’s fictional wallpaper might look, a column in *Harper’s Bazaar* from 1876 describes gilded wallpapers in terms very similar to those in “The Yellow Wall-Paper”: “a gilded paper [. . .] is [. . .] frequently hideous in design and in effect; in one light comes blinding dazzle of gold, in another as dark a blur as if the walls were smooched; the effect of the room does not remain the same for five minutes together, and is never the same to two different persons.” “The Wall-Paper,” *Harper’s Bazaar* (1876), 98. Could it be that the faded yellow of the paper is actually tarnished gilding?

the shifting atmosphere of the paper's smoldering colors, and this guiding tone intensifies the interpretive quest and provides it with boundaries, even as it remains distinct from it.

Cast in terms of the sun's changing rays and the moon's radiant glow, color indexes the interactions between light and a textured surface which Gilman uses to draw attention to the openness of the human body to its environment. As light, color creeps. It escapes from its form and engages a viewer, fostering a perceptual event in which the perceiver and perceived are tangled in a colored knot. While watching the moonlight, which "creeps so slowly," play on "that undulating wallpaper," the narrator takes on the qualities of the interaction: she watches "till [she] felt creepy" (11). By the end of the story, the creeping light infuses the pattern, the imagined woman behind the pattern, and finally the narrator herself, as she circles round the room "creep[ing]" over her collapsed husband (19). Though not specified as such, the atmospheric effects that bind these elements of the scene together function like the colors of late-nineteenth-century design theory. They cohere as a set of relations rather than as an object; they creep from one context or entity to another, emphasizing the passage and the transaction rather than the end-points. "Through This" (1893), a story often considered a companion piece to "The Yellow Wall-Paper," presents this same creepy connection between light and color. The opening sentences render the narrator's fixed attention to the play of sunlight on her wall: "The dawn colors creep up my bedroom wall, softly, slowly. Darkness, dim gray, dull blue, soft lavender, clear pink, pale yellow, warm gold—sunlight" (69). One ray of sunlight holds all of dawn's color, and the narrator's somber catalogue reveals the fluid character of morning's hues in a way that at once reinforces the shifting colors of "The Yellow Wall-Paper" and offers a foil for the tone in which they are viewed. In both



stories, the changing colors emphasize the act of perception over the static location of colors, and this movement dramatizes the ways in which we are constantly remaking and responding to our environment. Not only does the narrator live in a yellow room, but the wallpaper also “dwells in [her] mind” (9). The environmental determinism and evolutionary principles that inform Gilman’s campaigns for domestic reform are here figured as creeping colors, hues that jump off the wall and onto the viewer.

In refusing to stay put, in unduly attracting the narrator’s attention, the yellow of “The Yellow Wall-Paper” recalls a host of complaints against brightly-colored rooms that circulated through decoration advice columns in the 1890s. More often than not, these offensive wallpapers shared a common culprit: the aniline dyes that intensified and multiplied the hues of the commercial rainbow.<sup>30</sup> Writing for *The Ladies’ World* in 1896, Francis E. Fryatt warns her readers against selecting papers in these shades:

The writer was shown yesterday a paper which fairly glowed and throbbed with the vividness of its red coloring. [. . .] The red must have been of the aniline order, for to the sensitively endowed organs of sight, aniline colors, even aniline blues and greens and yellows, still more aniline reds, seem palpitatingly instinct with aggressive life.<sup>31</sup>

The hue matters less than the intensity here. The brightness of the aniline dyes endows them with “aggressive life” that reveals color as too complex and volatile of a stimulus to be analyzed only in terms of whether it is red, green, or yellow. It is not necessary to

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<sup>30</sup> For an account of the influence of these synthetic dyes and the commercial uses to which they were put, see William Leach, *Land of Desire: Merchants, Power, and the Rise of a New American Culture* (New York: Vintage, 1993). In *Bright Earth: Art and the Invention of Color* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2002), Phillip Ball places synthetic colors and industrial dyes within a larger history of the materials of painting. See chapter 7, “The Prismatic Metals: Synthetic Pigments and the Dawn of Color Chemistry,” and chapter 9, “A Passion for Purple: Dyes and the Industrialization of Color.”

<sup>31</sup> Frances E. Fryatt, “Selecting a Wall Paper,” *The Ladies’ World* (May 1896): 20. The next sentence of Fryatt’s article suggests the privileging of an autochthonous heritage, the establishment of a national history and identity, that is so often attributed to the discourses of this time period. “Good, old-fashioned dyes such as our ancestors employed faded, it is true, but they faded to still softer, gentler beauty; therefore, time improved rather than deteriorated them” (20, emphasis added).

claim that the wallpaper in Gilman's fictional room was "of the aniline order" (though it has certainly "fade[d] to an ugly condition," just as Fryatt warns that aniline papers will do). Instead, aniline dyes provide a context for understanding Gilman's vivid rendering of the effects of colored papers, a cultural disposition that blends attraction to the new forces of industry with repulsion at their loud and intrusive characters. In this way, they offer a complement to Paris Green and the other arsenic-based dyes that Heather Kirk Thomas and Peter Betjemann claim Gilman referenced to signal a general menace or medical danger lurking in color. Where arsenic supplies the danger, aniline emphasizes the allure of color; where arsenic points to death, aniline invokes "aggressive life."

Gilman thus brings the yellow of the wallpaper alive; for her narrator—and for her reader—color is a quality more visceral than visual. What Gilman does with her yellow, anthropologist Michael Taussig claims for all hues: "color dissolves the visual modality so as to become more creaturely and close, so close in fact that the image—or what was the image—becomes something which can absorb the onlooker."<sup>32</sup> Beyond the attachments to creeping light and screaming dyes, Gilman figures color as both a tactile and an olfactory sensation in order to further this project of intensifying color and establishing it as a mobile and full-bodied atmosphere rather than a mere hue.<sup>33</sup> To begin, the yellow literally gets all over everything. Accused by the jealous narrator of

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<sup>32</sup> Michael Taussig, *What Color is the Sacred?* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2009), 19. Elsewhere, Taussig refers to color as a "polymorphous magical substance" that "moves" and that "affects all the senses, not just sight" (40).

<sup>33</sup> Betjemann, like Thomas and other critics, situates the "smooches" in terms of the fears surrounding arsenic-based wallpapers, but rather than emphasize the tactile nature of this connection, he uses health inspector R. C. Kedzie's *Shadows from the Walls of Death* (1872), a catalogue of dangerous wallpapers, to show how the very nature of the book privileges the visual components of color that the actual nature of the threat made irrelevant. In other words, you couldn't tell a dangerous paper by sight, and yet Kedzie compiled his book on the assumption that a visual acquaintance with the papers would help inform and protect consumers. Betjemann, "Charlotte Perkins Gilman's Grammar of Ornament: Stylistic Tagging and the Politics of Figuration in 'The Yellow Wallpaper' and 'The Unexpected,'" *Word and Image* 24.4 (October-December 2008), 397.

molesting the paper, Jennie explains that “the paper stained everything it touched” and “that she had found yellow smooches on all [the narrator’s] clothes and John’s” (13). At story’s end, this smooch has formed a steady ring around the room, and the narrator and the wallpaper rub into one another, illustrating Taussig’s contention that color facilitates the collapse of the onlooker into the image. To know the wallpaper, in this story, is to smooch it; yet this intimacy threatens the distance and reserve required for traditional epistemological claims. Certainly John’s prognosis requires a detachment, a coldness that could not be gained through such an intimate engagement with color. But the challenge of color, for Gilman’s narrator, for aesthetes such as Wilde, and for philosophers such as Nietzsche, is a challenge aimed at traditional accounts of epistemology that confine our knowledge to conscious thought. Color too knows something, and the imperative to control this knowledge and to bring it into rational thought will occupy the third section of this chapter.

In the description of the room’s smell, Gilman finds her most memorable figuration of color’s atmospheric character. Like color, the smell of the room “creeps all over the house,” and like color its sensory character depends on the atmospheric conditions: the fog and rain intensifies it; the sun and air dissipates it (14). The shift to olfactory sensations enables Gilman to render the thick, pervasive quality of the color in vivid terms. “I find it hovering in the dining-room,” the narrator explains, “skulking in the parlor, hiding in the hall, lying in wait for me on the stairs.” Even more so than the smooches, color-as-smell invades the inhabitants, filling their lungs and covering their bodies: “[i]t gets into my hair” (14). Such proximity extends the erotics of color established in the smooches, pressing it towards the sexual image of the narrator

“wak[ing] up in the night and find[ing] [the smell] hanging over me.” Moreover, the smell, like color, resists analysis; it refuses to yield any clear meaning or referent and instead prompts a synesthetic analogy: “The only thing I can think of that it is like is the *color* of the paper! A yellow smell” (15). Gilman thus turns to other sensory realms to imagine the atmospheric effects of color, and her hovering, skulking, and hanging yellow further illustrates the physiological and psychological impact of color. It dwells in your mind, and it gets in your hair.

The smell and the smooches, alongside the light and the creeping, establish the yellow as an affective tone rather than a purely visual *quale*. Loosed from the realm of sight, color thus becomes available for Gilman’s literary project. According to Ngai, as mentioned above, fictional tone refers to an affective stance a text has towards the world. Irreducible either to the feelings represented in the story or to the emotions it evokes in the reader, the tone of a work resides in the interaction between text and reader, the site of entanglement that Gilman imagines as a streak of color smeared across both the wallpaper and the narrator. The structuring atmosphere in which this event occurs directs the encounter without predetermining it, and some types of weather give more room for play than others. Gilman demonstrates the workings of affective tone when her narrator shares the thoughts prompted by that “strangest yellow, that wall-paper.” “It makes me think of all the yellow things I ever saw,” she announces; but then she qualifies: “not beautiful one like buttercups, but old foul, bad yellow things” (14). What begins as an all-inclusive embrace turns instead into a sorting mechanism, a way of making certain things visible or pertinent (“foul, bad yellow things”) and rendering others invisible or irrelevant (“buttercups”). Any interpretation or thought that emerges from this context

does so only insofar as it has passed through and been shaped by the affective atmosphere that encourages some connections and blocks others. Like color in a room, the tone of a text lurks in the background, generally unnoticed but always felt.

Yet in “The Yellow Wall-Paper,” Gilman creates a narrator who places the background in the foreground and thus offers a remarkable opportunity to explore the tonal atmosphere of the text. An anonymous reviewer describes this formal peculiarity as the story’s “simple ‘un-narration,’” its compelling readability even in the absence of a plot.<sup>34</sup> In the terms of this chapter, we might say that Gilman favors color tones over plot lines. Rather than weave a dense narrative, she stages the increasing amplification of a maddening mood, one that pervades both the space of the story and the rhythm of the language. Through clipped sentences, a slippery form of first person narration, and the recurrent descriptions of the wallpaper that transform from repulsion and horror to fascination and attraction, Gilman attempts to embed “a materially created semblance of feeling” into her language. Like the soundtrack, camera angles, and lighting of a David Lynch film, these formal elements contribute more to the cultivation of a mood than the elaboration of a plot. In this regard, Gilman follows her acknowledged predecessor Edgar Allan Poe, another literary writer who formulated an understanding of textual mechanics in terms related to his thoughts on interior design, and her less-recognized Romantic forerunner, Nathaniel Hawthorne. Where Gilman draws explicit comparisons between the effects of “The Yellow Wall-Paper” and those of Poe’s stories, her engagement with Hawthorne, signaled not least in her choice of a moon-lit nursery for

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<sup>34</sup> Anon, “Books: Light and Serious Stories” [1899], in Golden, *Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s “The Yellow Wall-Paper”: A Sourcebook and Critical Edition*, 84.

her tale of transformation, has received slight critical attention.<sup>35</sup> Yet it is the formulation of romance provided in *The House of Seven Gables* that best fits Gilman's own literary practice: the author of a romance, Hawthorne writes, "may so manage his atmospherical medium as to bring out or mellow the lights and deepen and enrich the shadow of the picture."<sup>36</sup> Gilman adopts the attention to literary atmosphere—figured as the tones of a picture—and combines it with the psychological and decorative arts discourses of her day in order to reach a conception of affective tone able to function like color in its influence on the mind and body.

Understood less as an aural quality (as in a tone of voice) and more as a visual metaphor, Gilman's literary tone returns us to Whistler's color harmonies and Wilde's celebration of color's meaninglessness. As critic Birgit Borelius explains, Whistler began using musical titles such as "Symphony in White" or "Harmony in Grey and Gold" in order to "avoid the literary associations and moral observations so irrelevant to painting that the critics of the period delighted in pointing out."<sup>37</sup> Color tones thus truly did substitute for plot lines. Yet in the hands of Wilde (and those of Baudelaire, Rimbaud, and Huysmans), such color folded back into literature, providing a way to explore the sensual experience of language and the amplifying qualities of rhythm, figure,

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<sup>35</sup> In her autobiography, Gilman connects her work to Poe's when she voices her reaction to Horace Scudder's rejection of "The Yellow Wall-Paper" on the grounds that it would make people miserable: "This was funny. The story was meant to be dreadful, and succeeded. I suppose he would have sent back one of Poe's on the same ground." Gilman, *The Living of Charlotte Perkins Gilman*, 119. For Poe's stance on interior design, which stresses the need for "repose" and the use of a color scheme to "determine the character of the room," see "The Philosophy of Furniture," *The Complete Works of Edgar Allan Poe*, Vol. XIV, ed. James A Harrison (New York: T.Y. Crowell and Co.), 107. Poe applies this essay's insistence on how material arrangements of sensory stimuli produce particular effects on human observers to his literary practice in "The Philosophy of Composition," and in stories such as "The Masque of the Red Death" and, to a lesser degree, "Berenice" and "The Black Cat," he focuses this technique on color.

<sup>36</sup> Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The House of Seven Gables*. Ed. Robert S. Levine (New York: Norton, 2006), 3.

<sup>37</sup> Birgit Borelius, "Oscar Wilde, Whistler and Colours," 11-12.

and syntax. In all of this, the inherent absence of referential content in color gives to hues their most distinctive and potent quality.<sup>38</sup> Colors do not mean anything in themselves; their individual characters are only brought out in their relations. The application of colors, then, has little to do with the transmission of a color code and everything to do with the connection of hues to a range of other stimuli and entities to either increase or dampen an intended effect. Such was M. E. Chevreul's discovery at Gobelins Tapestry Works, and such continues to inform fashion device today. "[T]he right color," writes an advice columnist in 1914, can "accentuate a charm" and "intensify [a woman's] personality," but the wrong color will "destroy charm" and deaden the spirits.<sup>39</sup> Colors thus draw our attention to relational effects; they provide sites to investigate the interactions of an individual and an environment, or a reader and a text. But unlike most things that come under the eye of the critic, colors (and the *tones* of literary works) do not refer to anything in particular but rather attach to other elements of a text and stimulate or dampen their workings.<sup>40</sup> Finally, then, color returns to form. We separated it to note the unique quality of color that is so often overlooked in accounts of interpretation and textuality, but now we can reunite them and recognize color as the atmosphere surrounding literary patterns. Gilman's achievement is to have recognized

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<sup>38</sup> When critics such as Heilman and Thomas provide historical contexts for the interpretation of yellow in Gilman's story, they ignore the historical conception of color that informs their chosen contexts.

<sup>39</sup> Lady Duff-Gordon ("Lucille"), "The Health and Morals of Colors," *The Washington Post*, Oct. 18, 1914, SM4.

<sup>40</sup> This account of the colorful tones of fiction is indebted to Sianne Ngai's discussion of tone, which in turn draws on Sylvan Tompkins's theory of affect as "analog amplification." According to Ngai, Tompkins "describes affect as a mechanism that magnifies awareness and intensifies the effects of operations associated with other biological subsystems (drive, cognitive, motor, perceptual, homeostatic) by 'co-assembling' with these other vital mechanisms." Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, 52.

the importance of these related elements of fiction and to have crafted a story that meditates on them both.

## **Color Schemes**

As a field of study concerned with the relation between indigenous peoples and their environments, anthropology always had something in common with interior design. But while most early ethnographers would not have recognized a correspondence between their own investigations and those of the decorator, design reformers often drew explicitly on the biological assumptions that late-nineteenth-century studies of “primitive” cultures tended to reinforce. Chief among these was the idea that “phylogeny recapitulates ontogeny,” or that the human embryo and child pass through the successive phases of natural and cultural evolution respectively. In “Ornament and Crime” (1908), one of the most influential essays on early modernist design theory, Adolf Loos opens his argument against ornament by casting recapitulation theory in terms of color perception. Born with “sense impressions [. . .] like a new-born dog’s,” the human child, according to Loos, passes through “all changes corresponding to the development of humanity”:

At two he sees with the eyes of a Papuan, at four with those of a Germanic tribesman, at six of Socrates, at eight of Voltaire. At eight he becomes aware of violet, the color discovered by the eighteenth century; before that, violets were blue and the purple snail was red. (167)

Loos reasons that the taste for bright, basic colors and the impulse to decorate the objects of everyday use with non-instrumental ornamentation each belong to a stage of cultural evolution that Western Europe has long since passed. Thus he argues that ornamentation amounts to a crime against civilization, a regressive gesture that holds back the evolution of art and the community. (In terms applicable to Gilman’s famous story, he charges that



“anyone who goes to [. . . Beethoven’s] *Ninth* and then sits down to design a wallpaper pattern is either a fraud or a degenerate” [175]). By Loos’s logic, then, the colors one perceives—as expressed in the color-terms one uses—mark one’s place on the march of civilization: colors themselves may be meaningless and unavailable for direct interpretation, but color perceptions reveal much to the reader of cultures.<sup>41</sup>

The blend of psychology, design, and comparative anthropology offered in “Ornament and Crime” thus shifts the frame of analysis from colors as such to responses to color, and like Loos, Gilman directs her efforts at revealing the social and material conditions congealed within historical color perceptions. In particular, she blends her sociological techniques with her design school training to provide an ethnography of the housewife, theorized in *The Home* and dramatized in “The Yellow Wall-Paper” and “Through This.” Where Loos dismisses ornamentation in general as “degenerate,” Gilman focuses on the conditions of domestic labor—and the artistic tastes they produced—as “primitive” and therefore harmful to American “racial progress.” Color thus serves a dual purpose in Gilman’s fiction: it simultaneously diagnoses the material contexts of late-nineteenth-century nervousness (and thus marks something to be corrected) and provides the means through which that madness takes shape on the page

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<sup>41</sup> Like so many racist beliefs, the contention that the perceptual capacities of “primitive” people might be read through their linguistic reports of color persisted long after it had been dismissed by the scientific community. Indeed, over ten years before “Ornament and Crime,” American psychologist Havelock Ellis reported that “[t]here is now no doubt whatever that all races of men, concerning which evidence can be obtained, have been acquainted with the same regions of the spectrum which we know” (714). Havelock Ellis, “The Colour-Sense in Literature” (1896). Ellis and Loos both respond to the debate about the relation of color words to color perception that developed throughout the late-nineteenth century, generally with reference to William Gladstone’s controversial argument that Homer’s relatively hue-impoorished color vocabulary indicated a color-blindness characteristic of all ancient Greeks. (This explains why Socrates comes between the Germanic tribesman and Voltaire in Loos’s narrative of color evolution.) For a discussion of the parameters and influence of Gladstone’s argument and the debates that followed, see Sigmund Skard, *The Use of Color in Literature: A Survey of Research* (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1946), 166-69. For the persistence of recapitulation theory more generally, see Stephen Jay Gould, *Ontogeny and Phylogeny* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap of Harvard Univ. Press, 1985).

(and thus indicates a powerful artistic tool). This mix of fear and attraction runs throughout the history of color in the West, and in Gilman's work it expresses her Progressive-era project of bringing dumb, sensory forces under reflective, conscious control. For Gilman, then, color can pass from threat to therapy only when given a particular figure, not in the sense of physical form but in the sense of literary presentation. Her goal, like that of many American decorators of her time, was to situate color—and all of the social relations expressed in its perception—within a rationalizing color scheme, a phrase Gilman endows with both aesthetic and political significance.

Neurasthenia, the malady that brought Gilman to the brink of madness and that tipped the narrator of "The Yellow Wall-Paper" far over it, circulated through medical and popular discourses as a symptom of modernity, one that could be either irritated or soothed by color. For George Beard, the man who gave the condition its name, neurasthenia emerged from the sudden shifts in temporality brought on by industrialization: the speed of the railroad, the rush of the urban crowd, the barrage of information conveyed by wire and the press. Nearly all nineteenth-century accounts of nervous disorders maintain a similar commitment to narratives of modernity and civilization, though some replace Beard's attention to the impact of modern technology on the nervous system with a condemnation of the sickly and "decadent" forms of modern art that blunt the progress of society. In Max Nordau's *Degeneration* (1892), an influential screed that diagnoses the artists and audiences of symbolist poetry, impressionist painting, and Wagnerian opera as either degenerate or neurasthenic, color techniques in modern painting and the synesthetic reveries of poets and musicians each

index specific physiological and neurological disorders.<sup>42</sup> The blurry scenes of Monet's canvases result from "*nystagmus*, or trembling of the eyeball"; paintings with intense yellows, reds, or blues reveal the artist's degenerated color senses, which have been reduced to the most basic color receptors; and any instance of "color mysticism" simply denotes "mental decay," a fact supposedly long known from "clinical observation" (*D* 27, 28, 142). More generally, Nordau quotes Cesare Lombroso to establish the "predominate attribute" of modern painters as "the colour-sense," an indication of their art's dearth of conceptual or rational content; giving Wilde's praise of decorative art a degenerate twist, he casts one more aspersion to these modern artists: "they will be decorative" (qtd. in *D* 24). The color palette of these artist-decorators depends on their neurological condition: excitable painters will choose "dynamogenous," or "force-producing" colors such as red, while depressive artists will use "enervating and inhibitive" colors such as blue (*D* 29). Like the decorators mentioned in the previous section, Nordau affirms color's "striking effect upon the nervous system," yet his focus is on diagnosing the particular maladies and degenerative stages expressed in the aesthetic presentation of color perceptions.<sup>43</sup>

The three Gilman short stories that engage with color most directly—"The Yellow Wall-Paper," "Through This," and "Dr. Clair's Place"—all link color perceptions to neurasthenic women. On the narrative level, they present color experiences as sites for

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<sup>42</sup> In an early chapter entitled, "Diagnosis," Nordau insists that "the physician, especially if he have [sic] devoted himself to the special study of nervous and mental maladies, recognizes at a glance, in the *fin-de-siècle* disposition, in the tendencies of contemporary art and poetry, in the life and conduct of the men who write mystic, symbolic, and 'degenerate' works, and the attitude taken by their admirers in the tastes and aesthetic instincts of fashionable society, the confluence of two well-defined conditions of disease, with which he is quite familiar, viz. degeneration (degeneracy) and hysteria, of which the minor stages are designated at neurasthenia." Max Nordau, *Degeneration* (New York: D. Appleton, 1895), 15. Hereafter cited as *D*.

<sup>43</sup> "Color an Appetizer: Shade of Food has Marked Effect on Appetite and Digestion," [*New York Herald*] *Washington Post*, 1 Jan 1911: M4.

the investigation of the social contexts that surround and influence interactions between embodied minds and colored walls. Stylistically, they employ color as a “force-producing” element that endows the literary presentation of nervous disorders and their cultural causes with a palpable figure. Gilman details the type of madness emerging from domestic labor in *The Home* (1903): the beleaguered housewife, she writes, “has to adjust, disadjust, and readjust her mental focus a thousand times a day; not only to things, but to actions; not only to actions, but to persons; and so, to live at all, she must develop a kind of mind that does *not object to discord*” (*H* 151-52, emphasis in original). In other words, the myriad tasks that comprise the daily routine of the average nineteenth-century woman each require careful attention to minute details, and the rapid succession from one to the other leaves the domestic laborer stripped of her capacity for synthetic or generalizing thought. With her head buried in cooking, cleaning, shopping, and child-rearing, she is rendered psychologically incapable of seeing the forest for the trees. In “The Yellow Wall-Paper,” this immersion within the sensory particulars of a perceptual scene constitutes the trajectory of the story, as the narrator moves from recognizing the wallpaper as a stable substance with changing attributes, to experiencing it as a series of entities that come and go with the changing light, and finally to collapsing all distinctions between herself and what she sees. The stress of her “nervous disorder” manifests itself in her too-specific and too-focused perceptual habits, and as seen in the previous section, Gilman brings these to life by literalizing the attributes assigned to interiors—and especially to their colors—in late-nineteenth-century design.

To be sure, Gilman’s rendition of madness, in its use of color to dramatize a perceptual flux in which each event brings a new object of perception and in which all

such objects emerge co-constitutively with their perceiving subjects, provides a vivid portrait of “pure perception” occurring outside the generalizing categories of abstract thought. Such moments intrigued a range of modern thinkers—including artists such as Cézanne, philosophers such as Nietzsche, and psychologists such as William James—and gained support through empirical investigations into the nature of phenomenal colors. In 1935, German psychologist David Katz discussed the inseparability of color from many achromatic elements such as illumination as the “brightness confound,” the co-existence and combination of many elements that language and thought smooth out into simple categories. “Surface colour and illumination,” Katz writes, “constitute [. . .] an indissoluble unity. [. . .] To every visual field with a particular illumination there belongs a *particular* white, a *particular* grey, etc., and we cannot arbitrarily replace these by the same colors in other degrees of pronouncedness.”<sup>44</sup> By these lights, Gilman’s image of an insane view of color captures precisely what Western thought and science have so long failed to grasp: the fundamentally relational nature of feelings and perceptions. But despite her jabs at “androcentric” medicine and rationality (personified in the husband John), Gilman was too tied to these same ideals of reason, progress, and science to pursue the more radically colorful components of her fiction. Instead, they appear in her work as evidence of a cultural discomfort with the unsettling powers of color, a force which she allows to enter her fiction only under the guise of madness.

If “The Yellow Wall-Paper” shows such color madness full-blown, “Through This” dramatizes the insanity in its incipience. Published one year after “The Yellow

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<sup>44</sup> Qtd. in Brian Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation* (Durham: Duke Univ. Press, 2002), 167. Massumi devotes an entire chapter to “The Brightness Confound,” and his discussion of how color constitutes “a field, a nondecomposable relational whole, nested within a larger, achromatic field” and how rigid modes of empirical investigation tend to shut such insights out of analysis provides a stimulating account of how colors might be used to construct a “superior” or “radical” empiricism.

Wall-Paper” and often recognized as a “companion” or even “prequel” to the more famous text, the story presents a day in the mental life of a housewife as she prepares meals, mends clothing, buys groceries, tucks in the kids, and—most notably—begins and ends her days by watching the sun’s color “creep” along her “bedroom wall.”<sup>45</sup> Like the earlier story, “Through This” attends to the sensory particulars of the narrator’s experience, cataloging the “rich odor of coffee” and “scented flowers, the “rosy babies sleeping [. . .] in the growing light,” the “bright” sun’s play upon “the grass under the rosebush,” the relative softness of torchon and Hamburg lace, the heaviness of a baby carriage, and a range of other images and sensations drawn together into a brief tale that foregrounds its formal regularity (the story is practically symmetrical) as much as “The Yellow Wall-Paper” emphasizes its formal dissolution (the gradual abnegation of the journal conceit).<sup>46</sup> The list of these sense impressions rushes at the reader in clipped sentences and short paragraphs, and the overall unity of the story serves primarily to buffer the barrage of “things,” “actions,” and “people” that assail the protagonist, causing her to break off thoughts in mid-formulation, misplace her shopping list, and overlook the sweeping. The story’s stream-of-consciousness style, then, dramatizes the workings of “a kind of mind that does *not object to discord*” (H 152), a consciousness under the strain of domestic labor yet still able to manage the myriad claims on her attention.

Gilman bookends the story’s scenes of domestic life with reciprocal descriptions of the luminous colors at dawn and at dusk, and these passages capture both the

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<sup>45</sup> For a brief introduction to this story, see Catherine J. Golden’s comments in her *The Yellow Wall-Paper: A Sourcebook and Critical Edition* (Routledge 2004), 34. Golden notes Denise D. Knight’s mention of the text as a “companion” to the earlier story, and then she offers her own suggestion that “Through This” be read as a “‘prequel’ to Gilman’s landmark tale” (35).

<sup>46</sup> See Cynthia J. Davis’s *Bodily and Narrative Forms* for an account of the formal elements of “The Yellow Wall-Paper.”

perceptual threat posed by the narrator's discordant life and the waning ability to compose the rush of sensations into a tentative unity. The story begins, "The dawn colors creep up my bedroom wall, softly, slowly. Darkness, dim gray, dull blue, soft lavender, clear pink, pale yellow, warm gold—sunlight." The almost liturgical tone of these sentences yields to vague speculations on the influence of domestic labor ("the sweet home duties through which my life shall touch the others!"), and eventually gives way to the bustle of the day.<sup>47</sup> Then, as the evening approaches, the narrator returns to bed, voicing her exhaustion before returning her attention to the hues of setting sun:

I'll go [to bed] now, if it is before dark—then get up early to-morrow and get the sweeping done. How loud the crickets are! The evening shades creep down my bedroom wall—softly—slowly.

Warm gold—pale yellow—clear pink—soft lavender—dull blue—dim gray—darkness.

Like the yellow, sulphur, and orange tints on the wallpaper, these hues "creep" across the wall, changing with the light, and the narrator attends to them with the intensity and concentration demanded by her daily routine. It's as if the creeping colors appear as after-images of all she had observed throughout the day, like the green image that appears after staring too long at a red patch. Taken together, the two passages provide a rather self-conscious—even clumsy—frame for the narrative, clumsy because the tone of these sentences contrasts so sharply with what comes between them. Yet this clumsiness is precisely the issue: the narrator's ability to create such soothing connections is threatened by the circumstances of her labor, and Gilman presents them here as evidence of healthy perceptual capacities faltering under the "primitive" conditions of the home. The blurred boundaries and synesthetic mixing that marks the madness of "The Yellow Wall-Paper"

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<sup>47</sup> Gilman indicates the extent to which the rhetoric of home decoration overlapped with more general notions of domesticity when she expands on the narrator's hopes for her "small, sweet well-ordered home, whose *restful influence* shall touch all comers" (69, emphasis added).

here lurk in the future, but the order “Through This” offers is only tentative, only sustainable if home life itself be restructured. Gilman indicates this progression by changing the commas that separate the terms of the first passage with dashes that connect those of the second: clear divisions give way to interconnections. Moreover, the adjectives appended to the colors—e.g. “warm,” “clear,” “soft”—suggest the sorts of transformations that occur to the yellow (into a smell, into a feeling).

But even if Gilman uses “Through This” to dramatize a stage prior to that rendered in “The Yellow Wall-Paper,” she treats the presentation of colors in the later story as an opportunity to refine her emphasis on asignifying, atmospheric hues. In “Through This,” colors move on the walls as agents of pure light, and their sheer variety and detachment from pattern shut down the interpretive reflex that motivates the narrator of the earlier tale. Instead of referencing objects or people outside of the story, the creeping colors clarify the text’s primary focus on a historically-situated mode of attention and the material conditions that shape it. Responses to color, rather than colors themselves, provide the grist for the interpretive mill, and like Loos and Nordau, Gilman presents specific sorts of perceptions as indications of particular psychological states. Yet unlike her more pessimistic contemporaries, she understood these mental conditions—at least in the case of white women—as linked to material circumstances that might be reconfigured or rearranged in order to produce different cognitive capacities. In particular, she viewed Victorian domestic arrangements as confining women “to a primitive, a savage plane of occupation,” which manifests itself in “an equally savage plane of aesthetic taste,” and her work consists of reforming the home and thus ushering it into the modern era (*H* 153). In this endeavor, colors both indicated the problem (the



clash of colors in domestic interiors marking the housewife's "savage" tastes) and figured the solution, the organization of sensuous and unruly hues under a rational order—a national color scheme.

The connection between colors and "primitive" peoples—including both the distant non-Western cultures brought into the American imagination by nineteenth-century colonialism and the more visible groups of Southern and Eastern European immigrants in the 1880s and 90s—comes to us already overdetermined. Brightly-colored clothing, an instinctual love of vivid hues, and a racially "colored" status all inform the image of the "foreign" element imposing upon America's national borders. Indeed, for later writers such as Madison Grant and Lothrop Stoddard, color becomes the primary metaphor—or maybe metonym—of the racial threat.<sup>48</sup> This anxiety enters into the design discourse in ways still colloquially familiar to us: decorating advice columnists warned of "wild riots" of "violent" hues that "crowd" a room. "Bright or gaily papered walls and showy patterns," Helen Binkerd Young explains to her correspondence course readers, "have a way of crowding into a room and clamoring for notice" ("HD" 44-45). Historian Jan Jennings notes the wide reach of this rhetoric, specifying that "[b]etween 1890 and 1910, writers who assessed women's choices for [wall]paper vehemently denounced walls that did not 'hold their place' and brightly colored or spottily patterned walls that 'crowded' a room" ("CP 258). Bright colors, it seems, act like the immigrants

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<sup>48</sup> See Madison Grant's *The Passing of the Great Race; Or the Racial Basis of European History* [1916] (New York: C. Scribner's Sons, 1921) and Lothrop Stoddard's *The Rising Tide of Color against White World-Supremacy* (New York: Scribner, 1920), especially their visual aids, which muster color printing technology to visualize world racial history in terms of a battle of hues.

with which they are associated, and the emphasis on plain, black-and-white dress in Victorian America assumed a new urgency in reaction to these lively hues.<sup>49</sup>

Gilman's colors thus participate in her vague nativist fears about the effects of immigration on the national "home," and her solution—not unlike the prescriptions of interior designers—involved bringing the sensual and rowdy elements of color into a unifying scheme. Hence, critics have been right to sense anxieties over the racial constitution of the nation in Gilman's colors, but they have been too narrow in their formulations because they treated a single shade—the yellow of the "Yellow Peril"—rather than color in general as a marker of nativist concerns. After all, Gilman's eugenic nationalism tends to limit itself to vague or unspecified fears about the national body rather than to express itself in direct attacks on particular groups. To speak in the decorative terms of Christopher Cook, she wants all of the elements of America's interior "to be brought into harmony by a right arrangement of color," and as Eastlake, Wilde, and others never fail to mention, the way to establish harmony is to find the right "keynote": "There should be one dominant hue in the room, to which all others are subordinate."<sup>50</sup> "The fault which I have observed in most of your rooms," Wilde announced to his American audiences, "is that there is apparent no definite scheme of

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<sup>49</sup> The association of immigrants with bright colors informs the etymological history of one of the adjectives affixed to the offensive decorations in "The Yellow Wall-Paper." "Lurid," which entered English as a word signifying a pale yellow or "ghostly" color, underwent a transformation at the turn of the century that ultimately ended in a complete reversal of its meaning. Rather than signify blanched or washed-out hues, "lurid" came to signify unpleasantly bright or gaudy colors. Thus, in 1913, a New York *Herald* writer could report, "I am fond of pale tints, rather than the wild riot of lurid color" (*OED*). I would argue that this shift was facilitated by the association of a sickly or spectral element with the perceived immigrant threat to the national body, which in turn linked the word with the gay tones of the "primitive" masses.

For an example of the late-Victorian reaction to "loud" and "violent reds, blues and pinks"—colors and styles associated with "the habitu  of the saloon"—see "The Offence of the Colored Shirt" in *The Ladies' Home Journal* XIV. 7 (June 1897): 14.

<sup>50</sup> Christopher Cook, *The House Beautiful* (1881), 333. Charles Eastlake, *Hints on Household Taste*, 120.

color. Everything is not attuned to a keynote as it should be. The apartments are crowded with pretty things which have no relation to one another.”<sup>51</sup> Color can provide the background through which to organize the messy elements of a democracy, even as it constitutes the very entities in need of organization. And color’s flexibility derives in part from its inherent meaninglessness; its sensory qualities only come to signify within particular social contexts.

The injunction to create a color scheme implies the possibility for raising the dumb elements of sensory experience to a reflective or linguistic plane, upon which they might be reconstructed or reconfigured within actual experience. The mix of anxiety and excitement that surrounds color indicates this potential, and design reformers often stressed the need to confront the unconscious and pervasive effects of wall colors so as to make them work for good rather than evil. As Candace Wheeler suggests in an 1893 article on interior decoration, color can be “the beneficent angel or the malicious devil of the house”:

Properly understood and successfully entreated, it is the most powerful mental influence of the home; but if totally disregarded or ignorantly dealt with, it is able to introduce a level of unrest, to refuse healing to tired nerves and overtaxed energies, to stir up anger and malice and all unseen enemies that lie in wait for victims of weakness and fatigue. (qtd. in “CP” 256)

The relational context within which color functions can direct its powers to any number of ends, and as the imagery of this quote reveals, the task of organizing the colors of the home often invoked the dangers of managing social relations in the modern era, both in terms of the stress of industrialized life (“tired nerves and overtaxed energies”) and in terms of the “unseen enemies that lie in wait” at the borders of the nation.

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<sup>51</sup> Wilde, *Decorative Art in America*, 11.

Set within this context, it may appear that any Progressive-era attempt to control color must carry all of the insidious connotations of the phrase most employed by home decorators: color *schemes*. But “Dr. Clair’s Place” (1915), Gilman’s most explicit treatment of rationalized colors, offers a more flexible and adaptive picture of how such reconstruction might look. In the story, a worn-out woman named Octavia, on the brink of suicide, agrees to offer her case to Dr. Willy Clair, a female doctor who treats nervous disorders in her mountainside sanitarium. Once she arrives, Octavia undergoes a restorative regime of sleep, nutrition, exercise, and social interaction, and prominent among her therapies is something Dr. Clair calls “the color treatment” (302). Octavia recalls the procedure as follows:

[Dr. Clair] put in my hand a little card of buttons, as it were, with wire attachments. I pressed one; the room was darkened, save for the tiny glow by which I saw the color list. Then, playing on the others, I could fill the room with any lovely hue I chose, and see them driving, mingling, changing as I played.

Once again, Gilman casts her colors as lights dancing upon a wall and filling a room with an affectively potent hue, but this time the observer controls the play of the lights, and her specific charge is to reflect on the physiological effects of various tints and shades. Indeed, the color treatment constitutes part of a three-pronged plan to foster greater awareness of sensory stimuli and thus to facilitate their control. ““When you feel the worst,”” Dr. Clair tells Octavia, ““will you be so good as to try either of these three things, and note the result””; she then shows her patient how to experiment with music, color, and tastes: ““Have you never noticed the close connection between a pleasant flavor and a state of mind?”” she asks (302). For each adjustment, Octavia is to ““make a study of these effects and note it for [Dr. Clair]””; the healing process, as the story

imagines it, involves examining the effects of our environment and submitting the unconscious influences—which, as we have seen, can be the cause of so much trouble—to scientific study.

In revisiting the connection between nervous bodies and colored lights, Gilman taps into the renewed interest in chromotherapy generated by the mass of shell-shocked soldiers returning from World War I. Though the therapeutic use of interior design long preceded the 1910s, the sudden increase in “nervous disorders”—this time among men—caused hospitals and paint manufacturers alike to explore the possibilities of colored walls on damaged nerves. As color historian John Gage notes, “[a]bout the time of the First World War, a good deal of work was being done to give a specifically therapeutic function to the decoration of hospital wards.”<sup>52</sup> Where in 1876, Rhoda and Agnes Garrett suggested that “[d]ecorators may be compared to doctors,” commentators forty years later show how doctors might be compared to decorators.<sup>53</sup> Oftentimes, these medico-decorative schemes proceeded on the basis of an assumed color-system, a set of correspondences between individual colors and the nervous effects they provoked. Moreover, such experiments were not limited to humans: in 1912, the *Atlanta Constitution* reported on a “a series of ‘snake studies’ made at the Bronx zoological gardens” demonstrating “that snakes can be appealed to by colors,” which have “a marked influence on the moods of the reptiles.” In particular, “[t]he emotions inspired

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<sup>52</sup> John Gage, *Color and Meaning*, 265. For an illustration of a therapeutic interior from the 1910s, one in which the healing hue is “Sunlight Yellow,” see the ad for Matone’s paint reprinted in Gage, *Color and Meaning*, 208.

<sup>53</sup> This progression was not so clear-cut. Rather, chromotherapy, first popularized in the United States through Edwin Babbitt’s *Principles of Light and Color* (1878), and modern design developed within the same cultural field, often borrowing from and informing one another from the 1870s through the 1920s. For a brief treatment of the “blue-light craze” associated with Dr. Ponza, “director of the lunatic asylum at Alessandria in Piedmont,” see Harold Wilson’s “The Relation of Color to the Emotions” in *The Arena* XIX.103 (June 1898), 813.

are thus catalogued: ‘Red, delight; baby blue, pleasure; yellow, contentment; navy blue, ecstasy; brown, irritation; green, anger; black indifference; purple, vanity.’<sup>54</sup> Putting aside the empirical question of how one distinguishes pleasure from ecstasy or contentment from vanity in a reptile, this article illustrates the general tendency to assign specific colors particular effects, but it is precisely this coding impulse which Dr. Clair’s color treatment resists. Rather than prescribe Octavia a couple of hours under a strong yellow light (a recommendation often made to cheer depressive patients), Dr. Clair provides the means for individuals to experiment with color combinations and effects as they work upon their minds and bodies at any one particular moment. The treatments, in other words, are interactive and contingent; they do not presume to hold for all people or even for one person over successive days.

In addition to this medical context, the “mingling” colors projected on the wall as the narrator “play[s]” on a “card of buttons” has a different predecessor, an artistic one. Three months before the publication of “Dr. Clair’s Place,” Alexander Scriabin unveiled his “chromola”—a type of color organ—at the Carnegie Hall premier of *Prometheus: A Poem of Fire*, and the innovative aesthetic combination of sound and color renewed debates about the possibilities of color-music that stretch back to Whistler. Scriabin’s chromola consisted of a series of “tungsten lamps under color filters” that rotated on a belt and shone their hues onto “a diaphanous material.”<sup>55</sup> As the music progressed, the color organ provided a visual accompaniment, a display of moving and animated colors controlled by a standard keyboard. The scene of Octavia’s recovery, then, resembles the

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<sup>54</sup> “Colors Influenced Moods of Snakes,” *The Atlanta Constitution*, 26 March 1912: 5.

<sup>55</sup> Edward Rice Doyle, “Will Colour Music Become an Art?” *The Bookman: a Review of Books and Life* 41.4 (June 1915), 399. Doyle reports that the chromola was designed by “Preston S. Millar, of the Electrical Testing Laboratories of New York” (399).

concert hall during Scriabin's show even more so than the shock wings of asylums and hospitals, and the control console has the effects of the chromola: "Then, *playing* on the others, I could fill the room with any lovely hue I chose, and see them driving, mingling, changing as I *played*" (302, emphasis mine).<sup>56</sup> Indeed, Gilman's tale shares much with the debates about color-music. To begin, theorizations of this "strange field of art" stressed the need for colors to be liberated from form and set into motion through the agency of light. Yet they also involved attempts to standardize color effects via the assumed analogy between light waves and sound waves.<sup>57</sup>

Beyond these similarities between the colors in Gilman's stories and the colors of the chromola, the work of Dr. Clair's sanitarium and the interest surrounding color music each drew from beliefs about the progressive civilization of culture. From the 1890s to the 1910s, articles either proposing a method for an art of pure color music or commenting on existing theories of its possibility listed an insufficiently refined color sense as the primary obstacle to the realization of color music.<sup>58</sup> Color music thus marked the vanguard in cultural evolution, a point in the future to be reached only through studied reflection on color sensations. But writers were generally hopeful; after all, they imagined that we have come a long way: "In very primitive countries," one writer notes, "the only colour distinctions known are frequently but black, white and

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<sup>56</sup> Scriabin originally intended for the entire concert hall to be filled with the shifting colors, but this plan proved impractical and he settled for colors projected at the front of the room.

<sup>57</sup> For surveys of the instruments and ideas surrounding color-music, see Harold Wilson's "The Relation of Color to the Emotions" and Kenneth Peacock's "Instruments to Perform Color-Music: Two Centuries of Technological Experimentation" in *Leonardo* 21.4 (1988): 397-406. Nordau, too, addresses colour-music, and assigns to it particular maladies and pathogens (*D* 139-43).

<sup>58</sup> "The reason why most persons consider colour music as an impossibility is because our colour sense is not highly developed," Doyle maintains. Doyle, "Will Colour Music Become an Art?" 400. Likewise, William Schooling notes, "Color seems to have every element necessary for exciting feelings as deep and as sympathetic as any that music calls forth, if only the appeal can be made and understood." William Schooling, "Color-Music, a Suggestion of a New Art," *Littell's Living Age* 206 (10 August 1895), 349.

red.”<sup>59</sup> William Schooling, a proponent and practitioner of color-music whose work combines a fascination with “the physical science of color” with an enthusiasm for “the philosophy of evolution,” imagines color-music as the logical next step in the specialization of the arts. He views the rituals and ceremonies of “primitive cultures” as simple, unrefined affairs that gather many skills and many people in an undifferentiated event. Because “progress comes about by the differentiation of parts,” he then follows how “from such crude beginnings we can trace change after change, differentiating more and more, and growing in complexity and definiteness.”<sup>60</sup> In particular, Schooling traces the origins of the specialized fields of acting, dancing, vocal music, oratory, and instrumental music in that “crude” ceremony, and he follows the differentiation of the various performers from one another and from the audience. Is it not time, he wonders, for the color-sense to detach itself from painting and drawing and become a field of study in its own right? The impressionists and other painters for whom “the ‘scheme of color’ is made to override the accuracy or the detail of the picture” suggest that such an advancement lies just ahead, and Schooling hopes that with the right instruments and artists, a new art of color—one that would require us to become more sensitive to chromatic qualities—might lead the human sensorium into a new stage of evolution.

The search for color-music thus involved twin imperatives: on the one hand, artists sought to make audiences more sensitive to nuanced color effects; on the other, as Schooling remarks, they must make the emotional appeal of colors “understood.” Jonathan Crary traces the larger course of this dual development in *Suspensions of Perception* (2001). In particular, he demonstrates how the developments of modern art

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<sup>59</sup> Doyle, “Will Colour Music Become an Art?” 400.

<sup>60</sup> Schooling, “Color-Music,” 353, 354.



and the techniques of consumer capitalism each emerged from the broader scientific investigations into the nature of individual sensations. The advances in knowledge about human physiology spurred the perceptual theories of Manet, Seurat, and Cézanne, but they also enabled increasingly sophisticated models of social control, evidenced in advertising and other fields. Slavoj Žižek presents a similar connection in the introduction to *The Parallax View* (2006), when he describes the World War Two-era Spanish torture cells that were “as inspired by ideas of geometric abstraction and surrealism as they were by avant-garde art theories on the psychological properties of color.”<sup>61</sup> Nearly one hundred years earlier, the *New York Herald* reported a comparable technique employed by the Russian state. Knowing that “[v]iolet [. . .] is the most depressing of all the colors,” the Russian government fashioned rooms from which “[a]ll rays of light whose vibrations are slower than those of blue or violet are excluded” to house dissidents and prisoners “of unusually brilliant mental attainments.” “In every case,” the writer reported, “the mind of the occupant, once brilliantly alert, becomes so dulled that he is unable to cope with the simplest facts of life.”<sup>62</sup> These examples provide a context for understanding how the same ideas that inform Gilman’s aesthetic use of color also contributed to her political vision for a managed society. In many regards, the two areas are intimately related, and the ideas of color developed in design reform certainly acknowledged the manipulative aspects of interior hues: “It is not by wine alone that a dinner party can be set in good humor,” Charles de Kay writes; “that is a coarse

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<sup>61</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *The Parallax View* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006), 3.

<sup>62</sup> “Color an Appetizer” (1911), M4.

method compared with the action of colors on the unconscious subjects of a properly managed interior.”<sup>63</sup>

Though many art decorators and all enthusiasts over an art of pure color dreamed of color abstracted from form, Gilman recognizes that any use of color occurs within a particular social and political context, which endows the hues with shape insofar as it influences their perception. As such, we go astray if we attempt to read her literary colors as experiments in pure perception—Gilman is no Rimbaud, no Wilde. Instead, she embraces the possibilities of bringing color into literature, and her own career path—from visual artist to literary writer to sociologist—demonstrates this movement away from the strictly visual and towards the complex interactions of social and natural factors that constitute human experience. She drew from the models of chromatic influence popular in art decoration, but she did so in order to heighten a literary mood that could be put into the service of a political project. Her texts do not use colors simply to stimulate; they embed perception within a broader cultural milieu and encourage readers to investigate color experience as a site that makes visible the shape and texture of our interactions with a social and physical environment. She plays the Dr. Clair to her audience’s Octavia, calling us to reflect on the web of relations in which we find ourselves and to conduct an analysis of its components in order to enable a reconstruction of its terms. Color, in other words, provides a figure for giving cultural conditions a sensible form.

Returning to “The Yellow Wall-Paper,” we can now recognize Gilman’s project in that story as one of finding a figure for color. Her investigation of figuration begins on

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<sup>63</sup> de Kay, “Colors and the Mind,” BR9.

the story's first page, when she remarks that John "scoffs openly at any talk of things not to be felt and seen and put down in figures" (3).<sup>64</sup> Here, "figures" refers to numbers and charts, the abstract tools of translation and visualization through which science stabilizes phenomena and transports them through space and time. As readers of the story well know, the narrator soon creates a figure of her own, and like John's it gives a particular state of affairs a visible and physical body: when the "faint figure" in the wallpaper "seem[s] to shake the pattern," the narrator gets out of bed and "[goes] *to feel and see* if the paper *did* move, and when I came back John was awake" (11, emphasis added). Gilman offers this scene as an explicit counterpart to the opening description of John; juxtaposed, these two figures model contrasting ways of translating the world into abstract forms available for communication. The figures make something that was previously invisible or intangible into something seen and felt and able to be discussed. But a figure is not the same thing as a form. Indeed, the narrator first describes the image emerging from behind the pattern as "a strange, provoking, *formless sort of figure*," one distinguished from the "conspicuous front design" by a "different shade" visible only "in certain lights" (8, emphasis added). Without form and inextricable from the light: what could this new "sort of figure" be other than a figure for color? The remainder of the story traces the narrator's elaboration of this "faint figure" into a fully-narrativized woman complete with a social history; Gilman thus follows the paths through which sensory experience—captured through color—takes on shape and meaning within a political context. She uses the fully-relational quality of color perceptions to draw

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<sup>64</sup> As in the description of the husband's "intense horror of superstition" that directly precedes it, this passage mocks John's empiricism through its paradoxical formulation: in the same way that an "intense horror of superstition" seems to enact the same emotional responses an anti-superstitious stance should avoid, the emphasis on seeing and feeling with regards to numerals draws attention to how what counts as proof in John's logic is often that which does not actually appear within experience.

attention to social relations in general and gender relations in particular. In strictly stylistic terms, this project informs the unique blend of sensationalism and didacticism in “The Yellow Wall-Paper,” the mix of gothic or grotesque elements with a clear polemical purpose. By these lights, the figure of color allows the prose to take on an eerie and unsettling tone that attempts to upset readers as one stage within a larger process of reconstruction. In broader terms, Gilman’s technique of using literary color to give sensible form to the mental lives of housewives aims at making such conditions available for rational reform, for ever more harmonious color schemes.

## CHAPTER THREE

### Red Cars with Red Lights and Red Drivers:

#### Color, Crane, and Qualia

Stephen Crane never posed the question of color's function in literature as explicitly as he did in *The Third Violet* (1897). In this often-ignored and much-maligned novel of manners, Crane places an artist and a writer before a painting in progress and registers their different responses. As William Hawker, an illustrator and painter, works on a landscape of the Sullivan County countryside at twilight, his literary friend George Hollenden peeks over his shoulder: "Say, does that shadow look pure purple to you?" The painter responds tartly, "Certainly it does or I wouldn't paint it so, duffer." Hollenden persists,

"Well, if that shadow is pure purple my eyes are liars. It looks like a kind of slate color to me. Lord, if what you fellows say in your paintings is true, the whole earth must be blazing and burning and glowing and—"

Hawker went into a rage. "Oh, you don't know anything about color, Hollie. For heaven's sake, shut up or I'll smash you with the easel."<sup>1</sup>

Hollenden's objection to the painter's "pure purple" and Hawker's response to the writer's grayscale rendering of the phenomenal world stage a distinction between our thoughts about colors and our perceptions of them, one that philosopher Charles S. Peirce illustrates with an analogous scene. Peirce claims that if an "ordinary man" and an artist

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<sup>1</sup> Stephen Crane, *Prose and Poetry*, ed. J. C. Levenson (New York: Library of America, 1984), 337-38. Subsequent citations to *Prose and Poetry* refer to this edition and will appear parenthetically.

survey a snow-covered field “on which the sun shines brightly except where shadows fall,” the former will describe the landscape as “white, pure white, whiter in the sunlight, a little greyish in the shadow.” The latter, however, will report “that the shadows are not grey but dull blue and that the snow in sunshine is of a rich yellow.” Peirce accounts for this disparity by arguing that the “ordinary man” responds according to “his theory of what *ought* to be seen” rather than to “what is before his eyes”; his thoughts modify his perception of the presentness of the world and interfere with the immediate observation that marks the artist (5.42).<sup>2</sup>

Crane and Peirce put pairs of people in front of shadowed landscapes to test what it means to “know” something about color. While both scenes examine the relationship between cognitive processing and immediate sensation, Hollie’s skepticism about what artists “say in [their] paintings” reflects Crane’s additional attention to the nature of statements about visual tones. Crane’s friend and mentor Hamlin Garland demonstrates the bearing such statements have on our perceptual experience by unwittingly flipping Peirce’s formulation on its head: in an essay praising the naïve eyes of impressionist painters (a quality marked by “the prevalence of blue or purple shadows”), Garland predicates artistic vision on ideas about color. “In my own case,” he explains, “I got my first idea of colored shadows from reading one of Herbert Spencer’s essays . [ . . . ] I then came to see blue and grape-color in the shadows on the snow.” His account raises the possibility that painterly perception could emerge from the literary presentation of a

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<sup>2</sup> Parenthetical citations for Charles S. Peirce’s *Collected Papers*, vols. 1-6 ed. Charles Hartshorne and Paul Weiss, vols. 7-8 ed. Arthur Banks (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1931-35; 1958) will follow the conventional method of volume number followed by paragraph number.

“blue-shadow idea.”<sup>3</sup> Much of Crane’s writing engages this slippage between the canvas of the painter and the “slate” of the writer to explore the conceptual and affective qualities of color experience that inform these encounters with blue-tinted shadows.

Through his experiments with the effects and character of chroma, Crane participated in a proliferation of innovations in color media that took place during his lifetime. Synthetic dyes and pigments produced by nineteenth-century advances in organic chemistry made a wide range of vivid colors readily available for all manners of industrial production, and the commercial uses of these new hues were driven by the descriptions of color experience offered by experimental psychology. From the interlocking development of these modern technologies and theories of color emerged a set of practices predicated on color’s ability to produce direct and manageable effects on the human sensorium. These techniques spread throughout the United States, concentrating in urban centers such as Crane’s New York. Architects John Wellborn Root and Louis Sullivan incorporated stained glass and multicolored facades into their buildings; department stores such as Macy’s and Wanamaker’s used bold hues to attract shoppers; New York newspapers, such as Pulitzer’s *World* and Hearst’s *Journal*, experimented with simple color printing to raise circulation; and chromolithographs became an almost ubiquitous aspect of home decorations.<sup>4</sup> Even the kids got to join: Milton Bradley and art educators praised the pedagogical benefits of colors, and “[n]ew

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<sup>3</sup> Hamlin Garland. “Impressionism,” *Crumbling Idols: Twelve Essays on Art Dealing Chiefly with Literature, Painting, and the Drama*, ed. Jane Johnson (1894; reprint, Cambridge, MA: Belknap P, 1960), 97, 102, 97.

<sup>4</sup> William Leach, *Land of Desire: Merchants, Power, and the Rise of a New American Culture* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1993), 76, 77. Subsequent citations will appear parenthetically as *LD*. David Halliburton, *The Color of the Sky: A Study of Stephen Crane* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1989), 63. For a thorough and well-illustrated account of the growth of color images and their uses in nineteenth-century America, see Jay T. Last’s *The Color Explosion: Nineteenth-Century American Lithography* (Santa Ana, CA: Hillcrest P, 2005).

materials, like colored chalk, colored crayons, and colored paper, were added to the stock of instructional materials” (*LD* 156). Each of these projects indicates an interest in the physiological and psychological effects of color that received complementary treatment in turn-of-the-century philosophical, medical, and commercial debates. Within this context Crane created his colorful literary style.

These historical ventures, and the changing methods of paint and dye production that enabled them, altered the palette of modern America. Colors chemically-rendered from coal-tar replaced traditional paints made from roots, minerals, and insects, and their unearthly brilliance and broad utility created new opportunities for the enjoyment and application of color. Commercial interests took on these new tones with enthusiasm and developed an aesthetic of flat blocks of saturated hues that combined the uniform and intense qualities of synthetic shades with existing theories about the powers of pure colors. Advertising strategists and poster designers puzzled over color in the abstract—the redness of red apart from any instantiations rather than the appearance of a particular shade on an individual object. The French Impressionists famously revolted against this flattening of color experience and composed their canvases as flashes of sensation and perception: moments of the unsophisticated observation that Peirce locates in the artist. They attempted to recapture color as the fleeting play of light upon a surface, and this attention to immediate sensation untouched by conceptual processing has led many critics to count Crane as a literary impressionist. Yet Crane’s response to the changing ideas of color at the end of the nineteenth century differs significantly from that of the Impressionists. Rather than recoil from the flattening or abstraction of color, Crane presses it to explore both the insights it yields into our conceptual experience of visual



sensation and the possibilities it creates for literature. He follows a logic of textual colors separate from the nuanced shades of painting to establish the parameters and techniques guiding a distinctly literary aesthetic.<sup>5</sup>

In particular, Crane engaged with the color technologies and theories of his day to develop a style attentive to the influence of abstracted hues on bodies and minds. His prose pulls the energy of bold color patches in printing and advertising and infuses it into a literary project that investigates the conceptual experience of color. More so than his other works, *The Red Badge of Courage* illustrates this method of extracting color from objects, intensifying it, and re-constellating it in new affective and perceptual compounds. In this novel, Crane lifts the *feeling* of blue from its visual appearance and spreads it across his words and scenes to offer an event-based version of color irreducible to either subjective experience or objective physical properties. The movements and character of color in this episode of war pertain to philosophical discussions of *qualia*,

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<sup>5</sup> Critics have often allowed analogies regarding the theory of reality that subtends both painterly and literary impressionism to determine their account of Crane's colors. As a result, they draw faulty connections between different art forms and miss the distinct character of his palette. For instance, James Nagel moves from the claim that Crane's reader, "like the viewer of an Impressionist painting, is presented with an array of sensational details from a scene" to the assertions that Crane "thought of his colors in terms of painting" and uses hues that parallel "the implementation of color by Impressionistic painters." Nagel, *Stephen Crane and Literary Impressionism* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State Univ. Press, 1980), 55-56, 147, 150. R. W. Stallman makes a similar jump in the course of one sentence: "Crane paints in words exactly as the French Impressionists paint in pigments: both use pure colors and contrasts of colors." R. W. Stallman, "Stephen Crane: A Revaluation" in *Critiques and Essays on Modern Fiction, 1920-1951*, ed. John W. Aldridge (New York: Ronald Press Co., 1952), 253. Yet only by following Crane's colors on their own terms—and thus dissociating them from the logic of those in the visual arts—can we recognize the styles and methods that characterize his *literary* impressionism.

Key texts on the relation between Crane and impressionism include Sergio Perosa, "Naturalism and Impressionism in Stephen Crane's Fiction" in *Stephen Crane: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Maurice Bassan (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1967); John Barryman, *Stephen Crane: A Critical Biography* (1950, reprint. New York: Cooper Square Press, 2001), 289; Joseph Kwiat, "Stephen Crane and Painting" (*American Quarterly* 4.4 [winter 1952]): 331-38; and Bert Bender, "Hanging Crane in the Impressionist Museum" (*The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 35.1 [autumn 1976]): 47-55. For helpful summaries of the debates and the biographical and textual details that fuel them, see Nagel's first chapter, Halliburton, 326 n. 18, and Robert L. Hough's "Crane and Goethe: A Forgotten Relationship," in *Stephen Crane's Career: Perspectives and Evaluations*, ed. Thomas A. Gullason (New York: New York Univ. Press, 1972), 203 n. 2.

understood as the feeling of what it is like to have particular sensations (e.g. of seeing blue or of hearing a car horn) considered apart from any actual objects. Crane experiments with the possibilities of abstract, generalized tones in order to bring his language into contact with the sensual and affective force of color and, like Garland's "blue-shadow idea," to create textual spaces that enable new perceptual encounters. He brings Hollie and Hawker into a confrontation that frames his own attempts to pull from visual experience strategies and possibilities for literature. By establishing the theoretical implications of Crane's treatment of color alongside its historical contexts, this chapter seeks to determine the contribution Crane makes to our understanding of color experience and to put a fresh coat of paint on a faded critical topic.

### **The Physiology of Color**

Crane conducted two literary experiments: one in "misery," in which a youth lives as a homeless person for a night, and one in "luxury," in which the same youth goes undercover into an upper-class home. Judging by the stories, the latter posed greater dangers. First, there is the chance of being found out: "If they caught me making a study of them they'd attempt a murder," the youth says to his friend (549). But even more unsettling once inside the home is the color of the home furnishings. When the youth enters the house, the "splendor of the interior fill[s] him with awe," and when he returns from one of the bedrooms into the main hall, the "splendor of color and form swarm[s] upon him again" (551, 553). Stained glass placed high on the walls "caught the sunlight, and made it into marvelous hues that in places touched the dark walls"; at dinner, "lights shed marvelous hues of softened rose upon the table" (551, 556). These colors imbue the

surroundings with a palpable sensuousness, and the youth experiences them as forcefully as the change from the “thick rug” to the “tiled floor” (551). They startle him and bring him to his knees: “He bowed before the strength of this interior” (553). Crane’s youth comes “to steal certain colors, forms, impressions that were not his,” but the booty proves too potent (551). Yet the youth’s failure indicates Crane’s own fascination with the aesthetic intensification of sense experience associated with how the upper half lives.

The bodily and emotional effects of color experienced by the youth in “An Experiment in Luxury” (1894) suggest Crane’s comments on Goethe, the only source for color technique the young writer ever explicitly cited. When Crane referenced Goethe in a conversation with his fraternity brother Frank Noxon, he passed over the poet’s verse and drama and praised his compendious *Theory of Colours* (1810), the result of decades of experiments and the butt of many jokes within the nineteenth-century science community. According to Noxon, Crane was impressed by Goethe’s analysis of “the effect which the several colors have upon the human mind” and had used this “idea to produce his effects.”<sup>6</sup> Goethe maintains that each color makes a unique physiological and psychological impact: “every color produces a distinct impression on the mind, and thus addresses at once the eye and feelings.”<sup>7</sup> Speaking more exactly, he claims that warm colors, “yellow, red-yellow (orange), yellow-red (minium, cinnabar),” provoke “quick, lively, aspiring” feelings, while cool colors (“blue, red-blue, and blue-red”) “produce a restless, susceptible, anxious impression” (*TC* 306, 310). He bases his studies on experiments with colored light and prisms, and he relates his conclusions to colors in

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<sup>6</sup> Frank. W. Noxon, *Stephen Crane Remembered*, ed. Paul Sorrentino (Tuscaloosa, AL: Univ. of Alabama Press, 2006), 73-74.

<sup>7</sup> Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Theory of Colours*, trans. Charles Lock Eastlake (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1970), 350. Subsequent citations will appear parenthetically as *TC*.

themselves rather than to the objects on which they appear. Individual and combined hues, he explains, affect us “without relation to the nature or form of the object on whose surface they are apparent” (*TC* 304). Goethe thus offers Crane an account of pure color experience separate from yet co-extensive with our relations to colored objects.

The youth’s pronounced responses to the colored lights and vivid hues in “An Experiment in Luxury” dramatize the effects that Goethe postulates and Crane employs. Furthermore, they indicate late-nineteenth-century interests in color’s ability to affect people in non-conscious, physical ways.<sup>8</sup> Such concerns mingled with the intense, synthetic colors produced by new technological processes in pseudoscientific medicine and in the emerging fields of marketing and advertising. These related discourses on color and its ability to produce bodily effects illuminate the historical context within which Crane developed his own tonal techniques.

Nineteenth-century technologies of color both multiplied and intensified the hues of the commercial landscape. Developments in organic chemistry and synthetic dye production enabled manufacturers to produce an unprecedented range of affordable paints and inks—over one thousand varieties by 1880—and cheap printing processes in the 1890s spread these new hues via billboards, advertisement posters, tin-can labels, and electrical signs. New shades and tints appeared with such rapidity that by the turn of the century color standards were developed to clarify for everyone in business what particular “reds or blues actually looked like” (*LD* 50). Some of these synthetic colors

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<sup>8</sup> Crane explores the sensual appeal of colors through the bare consciousness of babies in two other New York sketches. In “An Ominous Baby” (1894) and “A Great Mistake” (1896), colors capture the attention of very young children, whose enthrallment takes the form first of engrossed absorption and then of desperate action: the violent theft of a bright red toy engine and the attempted pilfering of a yellow lemon. See Crane, *Prose and Poetry*, 527-29, 530-31. For more on the relationship between children and bright hues, see the following chapter of this dissertation.

even out-shone those of nature, and advertisers deployed their unworldly luminescence to endow commodities with an immaterial, almost spirit-like quality.<sup>9</sup> Yet according to Michael Taussig, these new tones ripped color out of its context, transforming it from a dynamic interplay of light upon a textured surface into a flat color patch, a spot on a mathematical chart. In particular, Taussig draws from art historian Anita Albus to define color as “a play with light in, through, and on a body—refracting, reflecting, and absorbing light” (“WCS” 47). The standardization of color production during this period, he argues, removed the varied textures that belonged to each tone of paint in previous centuries and thus lost the “life” of color. Moreover, the chemical processes involved in the manufacture of “dazzling, standardized colors” folded back onto the environment in the form of pollution, soot, and outdoor advertising (“WCS” 30). These double-barreled effects on the palettes of nature and the city, Taussig claims, “altered . . . the way humans thought of color” by modifying the sorts of shades people commonly saw (“WCS” 48). Although Taussig charts this change in elegiac tones, many late-nineteenth-century writers found positive possibilities opened by new ideas of “flat” and “abstracted” color experience.<sup>10</sup>

Colors conceived as powerful forces having generalizable effects grounded pseudoscientific and therapeutic endeavors in Crane’s lifetime. Goethe suggests the

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<sup>9</sup> Michael Taussig, “What Color is the Sacred?” *Critical Inquiry* 33 (autumn 2006): 30. Subsequent citations will appear parenthetically as “WCS.” For more on the history of synthetic colors, see Philip Ball’s *Bright Earth: Art and the Invention of Color* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2003), especially chapters 7-9, and Simon Garfield’s account of the invention and early career of the world’s first aniline dye in *Mauve: How One Man Invented a Color that Changed the World* (New York: Norton & Co., 2001).

<sup>10</sup> Taussig premises his insightful account of how coal-tar dyes separated colors from the textures upon which they had previously appeared on the assumption that synthetic colors were second-rate representations of the real colors of nature. From the blackness of coal, he explains, “all the colors of the rainbow could be imitated by the new dyes and paints, sweeping aside in a matter of decades all the pigments that had previously come from minerals, lichens, insects, and plants” (49). Crane, coming of age in the midst of these changes, did not register the new hues as marks of inauthenticity but rather as exciting developments that opened novel possibilities for the use of color in art.

phenomenological basis for the link between color and health as practiced in earlier beliefs about gems by appealing to “the refreshing sensation we experience, if on a cloudy day the sun illumines a single portion of the scene before us and displays its colours” (TC 304-05). Edwin Babbitt, in *The Principles of Light and Color* (1878), enshrouds this sun-touched refreshment within a dense theory of atoms and ether to articulate his influential “chromotherapy.” He rephrases Goethe’s characterization of color effects in the language of neurasthenia, dividing the spectrum into hues that “animate” the nerves and blood and those that “cool” them. Experiments using a spectroscope (invented four years after Goethe published his color theory) had shown that certain gases and metals “were found to produce characteristic lines when their emissions were passed through a prism”; “[t]he spectrum of magnesium, for example, was chiefly green; that of hydrogen, red; that of calcium, violet,” and so on.<sup>11</sup> Babbitt thus concluded that colors had particular chemical properties that might be used to treat physical and psychological disorders. His larger logic assumes that colors exist apart from the objects on which they appear. Because red things are stimulating (e.g. cayenne pepper, cloves, bromine, iron), red *as such* is a stimulant (PLC 18-19). Likewise, because yellow foods and chemicals often work as laxatives (e.g. may apples, figs, sulphur, eggs), yellow light itself might be used to treat costiveness or hemorrhoids (PLC 25-31).

Babbitt’s chromotherapy came complete with new instruments that he believed could cure a wide range of health problems. For full-body treatment and general vitalization, patients were to “bathe” in light passed through a “Chromolume,” a sheet of colored glass with blocks of hues arranged to correspond with the parts of the body.

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<sup>11</sup> Edwin D. Babbitt, *The Principles of Light and Color: The Classic Study of the Healing Power of Color*, ed. And annot. Faber Birren (1878; reprint, University Books, 1967), 13. Subsequent citations will appear parenthetically as PLC.

Babbitt pauses from his delineation of case studies and medical theory for a plug: because the chromolume's

colors [are] arranged very much on the law of harmonic contrast, as well as according to the principles of chemical affinity, it constitutes one of the most beautiful ornaments imaginable for a drawing-room, or bed-room window, and certainly one of the best of all instruments for vitalizing, healing and toning up the human system. (*PLC* 81)

For more localized treatment, Babbitt suggests the Chromo-Disc, a circular frame that supports interchangeable panes of colored glass. Though it does not have “the resplendent array of colors of the chromolume,” the Chromo-Disc has the advantage of providing specific treatment for problem areas and of being handy on trips (*PLC* 85). *The Principles of Light and Color* offers numerous examples of the wonders these and related instruments performed. Red light, Babbitt tells us, cured an eight-year-old paraplegic and reinvigorated a “worn out man of business”; yellow light loosened tight bowels; blue light soothed rashes and, in one case, reversed the progression of female balding (*PLC* 20-21, 28, 54). In each instance, Babbitt matches an abstract power of color transmitted through light to a particular physical ailment, and his work broadcasts a belief in the particular effects of generalized color.

Although Babbitt's faith in the physiological effects of colored light did not yield any enduring medical insights, they contributed to the development of modern marketing as businesses made use of color's unconscious influence on potential consumers. Enabled by the speedy production of bright, synthetic colors, advertisers and store managers manipulated “color, glass, and light” to develop what historian William Leach calls a “commercial aesthetic.”<sup>12</sup> By appropriating these “visual materials of desire,” historically used by armies, states, and religions to “excite devotion, loyalty, and fear”

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<sup>12</sup> For Leach on the connection between the commercial aesthetic and color therapy, see 393 n.16.

and to “depict otherworldly paradises,” they suggested a “*this-worldly* paradise” of pleasure and ease used to move goods (9). Ad posters, display cases, and department store decorators all used bold colors of the sort that awed the youth of “Experiment in Luxury” to stir physical and emotional responses that might be linked to particular products. As if to echo Goethe, graphic designer Joseph Binder explained that “[e]veryone can experience . . . the various effects produced by different colours, quite apart from their importance for the subject of the picture.” He therefore advised poster-painters to use “normal colours in a pure and intensified manner”; if one is to paint a tree, he says, “paint [it] as powerfully and brilliantly green as possible.”<sup>13</sup>

Pat Scully, the proprietor in “The Blue Hotel” (1898), seems to have anticipated the spirit of Binder’s advice. In this story, Crane registers the influence of textureless colors used within a commercial aesthetic in the light blue of the hotel that attracts the eyes of all who pass through Fort Romper.<sup>14</sup> The opening description compares the paint

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<sup>13</sup> Joseph Binder, *Colour in Advertising* (London: The Studio Publications, Inc., 1934), 17.

<sup>14</sup> In “The Bride Comes to Yellow Sky” (1898), another tale of the west published the same year as “The Blue Hotel,” Crane attends to other aspects of color’s role in the developing consumer economy. Rather than emphasize the sensory force of the brilliant synthetic hues driving the commercial aesthetic, he concentrates on the acts of class-identification involved in the color of commodities, especially dyed textiles. Scratchy Wilson’s “maroon-colored” shirt, which “had been purchased for purposes of decoration and made, principally, by some Jewish women on the east side of New York,” and the wonder with which Jack Potter and his wife approach the “sea-green figured velvet” and the “frescoes in olive and silver” on the train each demonstrate the important place colors hold in the production of self-image through consumption (794, 788).

A similar network of class, culture, and taste determines William Dean Howells’s use of colors in *The Rise of Silas Lapham* (1884; reprint ed. Don L. Cook, [New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1982]). Howells uses colors not for their abstract potency but for their signifying powers, their ability to situate characters within a hierarchy of class where tints and shades are closely linked to the materials on which they appear. For instance, the description of the rainbow of garish hues in the Lapham’s drawing room enjoins readers to snicker at the hillbilly palette: “the trim of the doors and windows was in light green and the panels in salmon; the walls were a plain tint of French gray paper, divided by gilt moldings into broad panels with a wide strip of red velvet paper running up the corners,” and so on for most of a page (190). Such techniques occur within the larger polarity between Silas’s attempts to “[rival] the hues of nature” with his mineral paints and the “feeling for color” that guides aristocrat Bromfield Corey’s portrait painting (59, 60). Howells aligns himself with the latter through Reverend Sewell’s plea to novelists to “[paint] life



to “a shade that is on the legs of a kind of heron, causing the bird to declare its position against any background.” “The Palace Hotel, then,” the narration continues, “was always screaming and howling in a way that made the dazzling winter landscape of Nebraska seem only a gray swampish hush.” In these two sentences, Crane captures the force of Taussig’s theoretical narrative: the brilliance of nature (the blue on the heron’s legs) has been extracted, intensified, and deployed in a generalized, bold form that dulls the brightness of the natural world. Yet Crane does not mourn a mode of color lost but rather ponders the effects of this new sort of hue. While tourists from the northeast find the shade tacky, residents of Fort Romper experience the “displayed delights” of the hotel as awesome: to them, the Scully “had performed a feat.” In either case, the heron-blue refuses to let travelers “pass the Palace Hotel without looking at it”; it demands attention, stirs emotions, and marks the establishment as part of the “West” (799). Consequently, the energy and exoticism of the paint could even be said to excite the volatile emotions of the Swede and to initiate the narrative arc that ends in the story’s violent conclusion.

The effects of the exterior in “The Blue Hotel” require the sensual receptiveness to color revealed through the interior in “An Experiment in Luxury.” Taken in the context of chromotherapy and advertising, these stories offer a conception of colors as forces potent in their abstract manifestations. They show how long-extant ideas about what particular colors *qua* colors can do interacted with the saturated tones enabled and disseminated by innovations in print media. It is from this late-nineteenth century matrix of theories and technologies of color, especially from the techniques driving commercial design, that Crane drew his own literary methods. Smooth paints and blocks of bold hues

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as it is,” and his representational fidelity to a nature outside of literature sets him apart from Crane’s stylized application of unnatural colors to revise the techniques of realism (175).

provided him with ready examples of colors used to intensify the presentation of experiences. Advertisements, as much as Goethe, taught Crane how to make color-effects.

### **Crane's Four-Color Posters**

The look of Crane's writing has long fascinated his readers. Late-nineteenth-century audiences puzzled over the curious, all-caps "lines" of *The Black Riders and Other Lines* (1895), and late-twentieth-century critics such as Michael Fried dwelled on the meticulous neatness of his manuscripts.<sup>15</sup> But most of all, Crane's readers have been interested in his colors, and in this regard his parodists offer some of the most vivid glosses of his style. Charles Battle Loomis mocks Crane's correspondence work by imagining the latter's response to the news that he has missed the battle at Mati: "The fight must have been between the Greeks and the Turks, and so it was full of my favorite color, red—Turkey red." The caricature heaps on color words, reporting "huge yellow oaths," "[r]ed and brown and green ants," and "a Turkish crash, cream color with a selvage of red." In his most playful exaggeration, Loomis describes a "short Greek" standing beside a youth who "looked blue for a minute, and then at a remark from the youth . . . changed color."<sup>16</sup>

Frank Norris also lampooned Crane's color-heavy prose, weighing down the first paragraph of "The Green Stones of Unrest" (1897) with "blue stones," a "seal brown" day, a "vermillion valley," and a "mauve hilltop." The protagonist of the parody, a Mere

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<sup>15</sup> Michael Fried, *Realism, Writing, Disfiguration: On Thomas Eakins and Stephen Crane* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1988).

<sup>16</sup> Appendix 8 in R. W. Stallman, *Stephen Crane: A Biography* (New York: G. Braziller, 1968), 552-53.

Boy, shines “a brilliant blue color” and travels along a road of “raw umber” along which he sees pebbles, “Naples yellow in color.” By shifting the palette from Crane’s primary colors to a more nuanced spectrum, Norris’s parody provides an unwitting foil for the force of Crane’s basic colors. It also suggests a source for his technique: “The blue Mere Boy transported himself diagonally athwart the larger landscape, printed in four colors, like a poster.”<sup>17</sup> If Crane’s writing looks like anything, Norris suggests, it is not an impressionist painting; it is an advertising poster, printed boldly in a limited range of flat colors. Other reviewers agreed. Jonathon Penn, writing on Crane’s “career in ‘poster’ literature” for *The Lotus* (1896), describes “[t]he fondness Mr. Crane shows for chromatic effects” as “a sort of ‘poster’ commentary.”<sup>18</sup> As these contemporary characterizations suggest, Crane’s images point to the techniques and tones of print media as a model for the intensification of experiences through color.

*The Red Badge of Courage*, the text that stands behind the telling caricatures of Loomis and Norris, offers the clearest illustrations of Crane’s use of poster-like hues. Its colors come in patches and sheets: “In the eastern sky there was a yellow patch like a rug laid for the feet of the coming sun; and against it, black and patternlike, loomed the gigantic figure of the colonel on a gigantic horse” (92-93). The dark silhouette cast in front of the bright background eschews shades and tints in favor of stark contrast. Likewise, the “sheets of orange light” that “illumine the shadowy distance,” “the blue, *enameled* sky,” and the notorious “red sun . . . *pasted* in the sky like a wafer” further the language of two-dimensionality in the novel (150, 176, 137, emphasis added). David

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<sup>17</sup> Frank Norris, “The Green Stones of Unrest,” in Gullason, *Stephen Crane’s Career*, 87-88.

<sup>18</sup> Jonathon Penn, “A Little Study of Stephen Crane,” *Lotus* 2 (October 1896): 208-11; reprinted in Gullason, *Stephen Crane’s Career*, 78, 80.

Halliburton indicates the peculiarity of Crane's reliance on basic colors when discussing the description of a regiment as "a smoke-wall penetrated by the flashing points of yellow and red."<sup>19</sup> "Although points of such color may well appear on a battlefield," he explains, "explosions from artillery are not typically in primary colors"; as such, the "yellow" in this scene "looks suspiciously like Goethe's paradigmatic yellow and the red looks equally pure."<sup>20</sup> What these images lack in depth or nuance, Halliburton suggests, they make up for with the brightness and intensity that accompanies pure colors. Furthermore, their flat quality contributes to the detached perspective of the prose. As the 304<sup>th</sup> makes its final charge, the narration steps back to offer an illustration of this pictorial and perspectival starkness: "It was a blind and despairing rush by the collection of men in dusty and tattered blue, over a green sward and under a sapphire sky, toward a fence, dimly outlined in smoke, from behind which sputtered the fierce rifles of enemies" (204). These excerpts show Crane's style at its most distinctive: unconcerned with the nuanced, textured tones of the natural world and interested in saturated patches of generalized color.

In the visual arts during the late nineteenth century, these flat colors and striking contrasts were popularized by Art Nouveau, a different French import that worked with the constrictions of color printing and advertising to create hyper-stylized images. Eugène Grasset's covers for *Harper's* in 1889, 1891, and 1892 popularized the style in America, where it was taken up by Louis Rhead and Will Bradley. Rhead "embraced Grasset's willowy maidens, contour lines, and flat color," but "he rejected [the] pale colors" of early Art Nouveau "in favor of vibrantly unexpected combinations, such as red

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<sup>19</sup> Crane, *Prose and Poetry*, 201.

<sup>20</sup> Halliburton, *The Color of the Sky*, 113.

contour lines on bright blue hair before an intense green sky.”<sup>21</sup> Peter C. Marzio’s characterization of the modes favored by chromolithographic printing techniques suggests the constraints that these artists exploited. When discussing illustrator Virginia Granbery, he explains that her style “was ideal for [Louis] Prang’s chromos: the bright, hard colors, with little blending or graduating of tones, made the printing separations relatively easy and economical to produce.”<sup>22</sup> Like the chromolithographers and poster painters, Crane eschewed nuanced attention to shades and tints in favor of flat blocks of vivid color. His choice of designers reflects his taste: Will Bradley adorned Crane’s *War is Kind and Other Lines* (1899) with “bold art nouveau illustrations.”<sup>23</sup>

Crane playfully hints at the commercial origins of his techniques in *The Third Violet* through a conversation between Miss Grace Fanhall and her suitor, Crane’s resident painter, William Hawker. Miss Fanhall presses Hawker to tell her about life in the artist studios. He replies with talk of cigarettes and card playing and the occasional job, and then tells her of his most well-known work: the “beautiful red and green designs that surround the common tomato can.” “Later,” he continues, “I got into green corn and asparagus” (302). If Crane’s writing approximates any of the work produced by artists at the turn of the century, it is not the blurred “impressions” of landscapes that Hawker displays in exhibitions but rather the “bright, flat colors, elaborate lettering, and iconic images” used by chromolithographed packaging “to create an emblematic presence for

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<sup>21</sup> Philip B. Meggs and Alston W. Purvis, *Meggs’ History of Graphic Design*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed. (Hoboken, NJ: J. Wiley and Sons, 2006), 207.

<sup>22</sup> Peter C. Marzio, *The Democratic Art, Chromolithography 1840-1900: Pictures for a 19<sup>th</sup>-Century America* (Boston, MA: D. R. Godine and Amon Carter Museum of Western Art, Fort Worth, 1979), 119.

<sup>23</sup> Stanley Wertheim, *A Stephen Crane Encyclopedia* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1997), 38.

the product.”<sup>24</sup> And his colors, like those on the logos and trademarks becoming common during his lifetime, contributed to the creation of his “unmistakable” style.<sup>25</sup>

To be sure, though, Crane’s colors do not always appear so flat. The introductory paragraphs of many of the city sketches foreground the lively play of street lamps and light from shop windows upon rainy pavements and snow. Yet even these moments, which seem to show Crane’s colors at their most “impressionistic,” function according to a rule of intensification through abstraction that Crane finds in commercial art. Thus, when Crane begins “An Experiment in Misery” (1894) by describing a “fine rain [that] was swirling softly down, causing the pavements to glisten with hue of steel and blue and yellow in the rays of innumerable lights,” he emphasizes the moisture to spread and to deepen the colors of the scene (538). He uses the rain—as he uses fog and snow elsewhere—to create conditions under which intense colors might be more vividly imagined by his readers.<sup>26</sup> Crane opens *George’s Mother* (1896) with similar colors, adding an explicit reference to the “picture” quality of the scene: “In the swirling rain that

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<sup>24</sup> Meggs and Purvis, *Meggs’ History of Graphic Design*, 158. See also Last, *Color Explosion*, 243-63.

<sup>25</sup> The distinctiveness of Crane’s colors might be sharpened through a quick comparison with Hamlin Garland. Unlike Howells, both Crane and Garland use colors to heighten the palpability of their images rather than to signify the class status of their characters. But where Crane relies on a narrow range of basic tones, Garland attempts to capture the presentness of the world’s palette by qualifying his colors with tint-shifting adjectives and evaluative commentary. In “A Branch Road,” he follows the “ever-shifting streaming banners of rose and pale green” at sunrise and the “glorious rose-color and orange shadows” in the evening; he pictures a sky “full of flame-colored clouds floating in a yellow-green sea, where bars of faint pink streamed broadly away” (5, 16, 28). Recalling the Impressionist painters he admired, Garland bucks against the clumsy categories of basic color words; he turns to faint pinks and pale greens to capture an instant of ever-shifting color where Crane uses bold reds and bright blues to experiment with the force of pure hues. Hamlin Garland, *Main-Travelled Roads* (1891; Lincoln, NE: Bison Books, 1995).

<sup>26</sup> Crane introduces colors in contexts that magnify their vibrancy and scope to prime readers to envision later uses of chromatic imagery with similar intensity, and in doing so he fits Elaine Scarry’s account of how authors include “the material antecedents of the perception to be produced” to aid in the construction of realistic mental pictures (16). Though Scarry’s *Dreaming by the Book* (New York: Farrar, Staus, Giroux, 1999) places too much explanatory emphasis on speculative claims that the techniques of successful writers “compl[y] with the structure of the human mind,” her study lists many general methods for the rendering of vivid images that Crane directs towards colors (145).

came at dusk the broad avenue glistened with that deep bluish tint which is so widely condemned when it is put into pictures. [. . .] Here and there [. . .] from the red street-lamps [. . .] a flare of uncertain, wavering crimson was thrown upon the wet pavements” (215). Again, Crane uses rain merely to heighten the imagined effects of the color; after the first paragraphs, the weather is not mentioned in any consequential way, and it is often ignored by characters who talk idly in the streets without seeming to mind the precipitation. The rain readies the city to take on the brilliant hues Crane wants to create by allowing the color to intensify, to disconnect itself from any particular body and to spread across the scene.<sup>27</sup>

In his use of rainy pavements to embolden the hues of his cities, Crane follows the techniques of commercial design: he extracts and intensifies the colors of phenomena to offer an experience realer than real. The early reviews of *The Red Badge of Courage*, which persistently assumed that such depictions of war could only be conjured by one who had lived through battle, demonstrate the success of his method and foreground the puzzling way in which Crane’s unrealistic stylization of visual experience became the hallmark of his realism.<sup>28</sup> Hollie’s response to Hawker’s painting in the previously cited scene from *The Third Violet* illustrates Crane’s attentiveness to the aspects of experience that seem to exceed the ordinary empirical field: “if what you fellows say in your paintings is true,” Hollie remarks, “the whole earth must be blazing and burning, and glowing and—.” Crane’s colors blaze and burn, and their intensity—though stylized

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<sup>27</sup> Many of Crane’s other New York tales—including *Maggie*, “The Fire,” and “The Men in Snow”—foreground glowing colors on wet pavements to intensify the imagined tones, just as the introductory paragraphs of *Red Badge* and “The Open Boat” (1898) use fog, a river, and the ocean.

<sup>28</sup> In a remarkable though not uncommon reaction, Sydney Brooks maintained that if *Red Badge* “were altogether a work of the imagination, unbased on personal experience, [Crane’s] realism would be nothing short of a miracle.” *Saturday Review*, 11 Jan 1896, 44-45. For a survey of this and other reviews of Crane’s war novel, see Stallman, *Stephen Crane*, 180-88.

beyond photographic verisimilitude—affords insights both into the nature of mental experience and its manipulation within aesthetic constructions.

While Crane's vivid depictions of visual experience beg for the sort of matching or influence games played above, we run amiss if we assume a symmetry between Crane's "vision" and that of painters and designers. Instead, the relation between Crane's writing and visual media should be understood as that between a flow of water through a turbine and the electrical current it produces. Crane did not attempt to replicate the style of posters and tomato can labels, but he was energized by the perceptual experience of the fin-de-siècle city in ways that led him to conceive of color as a generalized force with real effects on minds and bodies. He transferred the bold, abstracted, synthetic colors of advertising posters into a literary method both attuned to the sensual and emotional effects of particular shades and attentive to the manner in which we conceptually process color through language.

### **The Redness of *The Red Badge of Courage***

Goethe fears that it is dangerous to think about color. He warns, "'The ox becomes furious if a red cloth is shown to him; but the philosopher, who speaks of colour only in a general way, begins to rave'" (TC lv). These visceral responses indicate a shared physiology of color even as they articulate distinct levels of color experience. Where the fury of the ox stirs from a bare sensory reaction, the ravings of the philosopher attend to the frustrations that result from trying to think about colors. Certainly a particular color (*this* color, here and now) defies the universalizing tendencies of abstract thought, but, as Goethe's anecdote demonstrates, even the "general way" in which



philosophy approaches colors can prove maddening. For Crane, this general way amounts to language and the relation between colors and color words. To illustrate, Crane gives Goethe's example another turn of the screw: in *The Third Violet*, Hawker's father drives an ox named "Red." As Hawker and Miss Fanhall stroll through the woods, they hear William's father attempting to excite the lethargic animal. "Git over there, Red. Git over! Gee! Git-ap!," he yells; "Red, git over there now, will you? I'll trim the skin off'n you in a minute. Whoa!" (322). Crane makes plain that one of points that drives philosophers mad is that oxen respond differently to "red" than to red.

Crane's experiments with colors and his use of techniques absorbed and modified from his commercial context explore the potential of color for literature and, as such, test the limits and nature of color words. In "The Broken-Down Van" and *The Red Badge of Courage*, Crane performs the unmooring of color from objects that distinguishes his literary style, and the model of color experience he projects resonates with the philosophical work of Charles S. Peirce. In the end, these works illustrate Crane's attempts to bring writing into contact with visual *qualia* in order to detach the feeling of colors from their actual appearance and to produce textual—not visual—effects.

In "The Broken-Down Van" (1892), the earliest of the New York sketches, Crane turns a traffic jam into a study of the limitations of color terms and of abstract conceptions of color by amassing reds, greens, and blues around people and vehicles until the shades eclipse their objects. After introducing two red furniture vans "with impossible landscapes on their sides," Crane describes the arrival of "a horse car with a red light": "[t]he car was red, and the bullseye light was red, and the driver's hair was red," and when the driver has to slow down because of the lumbering vans he gets so

angry that he “pound[s] on the red dash board with his car-hook till the red light tremble[s].” The ensemble—car, light, dash, driver—constitutes a block of pure red that is soon joined by analogous aggregates of green and blue. The first few scenes of the sketch chart the manner in which these three colors prod and provoke one another into a chaotic frenzy; the blue car’s whistle causes the conductor of the green car to ring his bell, which in turn incites the red conductor to “lose the last vestige of control of himself and [. . .] bounce up and down on his bell strap,” and so on for two of the longest sentences in Crane’s corpus (521). The force of the repetition causes the words themselves to break in the sketch, to produce what Mary Esteve calls “chromatic blockages” that arrest our ability to imagine the scene.<sup>29</sup> Crane emphasizes the implications of their collapse through the wreck of the sketch’s titular van and its “impossible landscape” that occurs when the fury of the three colors reaches a fever pitch. Even after the van falters, Crane presses on: “A car with a white light, a car with a white and red light, a car with a white light and a green bar across it, a car with a blue light and a white circle around it, another car with a red bullseye light and one with a red flat light had come up and stopped” (523). Here, the repetition and stylized abstraction go too far; the “landscapes” in the story cannot be envisioned—they are “impossible” because they are rendered with broken-down words. The young writer characteristically begins by flirting with the breaking point.

In *The Red Badge of Courage*, Crane returns to this technique and hones it to the end of intensifying the sensation of blue extracted from the soldiers’ uniforms. Throughout the novel, he uses war as an occasion to explore color, from the martial

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<sup>29</sup> Mary Esteve, “A ‘Gorgeous Neutrality’: Stephen Crane’s Documentary Anaesthetics,” *ELH* 62.3 (autumn 1995): 678.

setting that pits blue against gray to the significance of each regiment's flag or "colors." The battle scenes demonstrate that Crane, like Taussig, recognizes that "war loves bright colors" ("WCS" 29). When Jim Conklin readies himself for combat, he "produce[s] a red handkerchief of some kind" which he "knot[s] . . . around his throat with exquisite attention to its position" (111). Furthermore, in the rush of a charge, Henry becomes keenly sensitive to colors: "Each blade of the green grass was bold and clear" (183). The youth's attunement to the vivid, changing colors of the battle scene provide a model for Crane's readers, who are presented with skirmishes as aesthetic tableaux, bright artillery fire playing upon the smoke and fog of the landscape.<sup>30</sup> As war prepares Henry to experience the intensity of greens, Crane readies his readers to absorb the images of his prose that, like the "bits of color" Henry recalls after the above scene, "stamp themselves unawares upon . . . engaged senses" (195). In this sense, the youth's initial theory that he had joined a "blue demonstration" rather than a fighting army has validity, especially insofar as it refers to the aesthetic nature of the novel (86).

By the final charges, the narrative's treatment of colors exceeds photographic realism and relies on a method of stylization in which colors overtake form. As in "The Broken-Down Van" (in which the word "red" appears fifteen times in the second paragraph), Crane piles on color terms to an almost distracting degree in these chapters. Twenty-eight of the fifty-four uses of "blue" in the novel appear in the final third of the book, and Crane crams seven of these instances in less than a page-and-a-half describing the second charge: "the blue wave," the "blue whirl of men," "the men in blue" (twice),

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<sup>30</sup> For an account of the "aesthetic" nature of Crane's battle scenes, especially in the final "competition over who has control over the colors," see Jane F. Thrailkill's *Affecting Fictions: Mind, Body, and Emotion in American Literary Realism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 2007), 150.

“[t]hey in blue,” the “swirling body of blue men,” and “the scampering blue men” (205-207).<sup>31</sup>

Furthermore, as Henry surveys the battle, the “parts of the opposing armies” become “two long waves,” and at one point “a spray of light forms go[es] in houndlike leaps toward the waving blue lines.” At another, a “blue wave dash[es] against “a gray obstruction” (200). Crane describes the confused scene, like that of the earlier sketch, in terms of colors, situating Henry’s failure to follow the battle as an inability to read the flags, to tell “which color of the cloth was winning” (201). Yet in the novel, Crane keeps a tighter reign on the abstraction in order to figure the fluidity of color unmoored. Thus, the blue of the uniforms shifts from describing a tone of clothing (the men “who had donned blue”) to constituting a field the soldiers inhabit (the “men *in* blue”), a feature that characterizes them (“blue men”), and even that which, in the rush of battle, blocks out their humanity (“bundles of blue”) (86, 205-06, 202). His language detaches the blue from its objects and magnifies it until it becomes the dominant feature of the scene, a quality that floats through forms and events without attaching itself to any one body.

Such a blue—one that does not inhere in any particular object or subject and that does not appear in perceptual experience as such—receives philosophical treatment in nineteenth- and twentieth-century debates about qualia. In brief, a *quale* refers to the feeling of a sensation, the *what*-ness that makes a particular feeling or experience what it is. A quale of blue refers to the feeling of what it is like to see or to experience blue apart from the cones and rods or particles and waves that comprise its physical facts. Peirce

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<sup>31</sup> H. G. Wells described such iterations as “chromatic splashes that at times deafen and confuse.” H. G. Wells, “Stephen Crane: From an English Standpoint,” in Gullason, *Stephen Crane’s Career*, 130. Where Esteve and Wells see blindness and deafness, I am locating a moment in Crane’s experiment with color that leads to his “miraculous” realism.

calls qualia “Firsts” and describes them as “certain qualities of feeling, such as the color of magenta, the odor of attar, the sound of a railway whistle,” as distinguished from their actual instantiations in objects (1.304). Alongside “Firstness,” Peirce offers the category of “Secondness” for actual existents and “Thirdness” for mediating relations. He thus discriminates between the sorts of colors viewed by the artist—those that deal with the immediate “presentness” of actual objects, such as the yellow snow in sunlight—and those that characterize Firstness. For Peirce, a pure color quale, as a First, is a “mere may-be,” a general entity that has real bearings on the world without being actualized in experience. The blueness of blue has a qualitative distinctiveness that co-exists with the characteristics of blue objects, and its virtual status enables it to be linked with other relations or situations within experience.

In Peircean terms, Crane begins with Seconds (the color of coats), extracts a First (the blueness of blue) and then reinstitutes it in new kinds of perceptual and affective objects; he looses the qualities of colors from physical entities and reattaches them to abstract nouns and events. He converts the power of individual hues assumed by Babbitt and advertising strategists into material for literature by detaching the feeling of seeing blue from the actual physical presence of blue. His descriptions of a “black rage” and the “red sickness of battle” in *Red Badge*, the “yellow discontent” of Maggie’s co-workers, and the “yellow crash” of a drunken George Kelcey, offer examples of these new combinations (150, 212, 24, 246). In each case, color is *felt* rather than *seen*; it permeates an action with a unifying affective quality without being localized in any specific subject or object. When Henry imagines the roaring guns behind him “shaking in black rage,” the blackness of the rage does not simply appear on the metal of the guns or in the fancy

of the youth but rather adheres as a felt quality in the mutual interaction of the elements of the situation: gun, youth, fear, battle, smoke, flight. Crane's phrase combines these components and treats the quality of the black not as a property passively *had* but as a capacity to affect and to be affected in a particular manner that resides in the entire situation—an ability to *blacken*.<sup>32</sup> In addition to implicitly functioning as verbs—the sky “reddens”; the grass “greens”; the pavement “yellows”—Crane's colors explicitly serve as adverbs. A shell in *Red Badge* explodes “redly,” just as “a fire burned redly” in “An Experiment in Luxury” (108, 551). These active senses of color reflect the redness of the title's “red badge.” The growing blood stain that seeps through Henry's bandage is not simply something the youth possesses; it is a quality that, like the “warm color” splashes of the flags, spreads out into the situations he encounters (116).

Crane and Peirce each recognize a link between the qualitative Firstness of color and the terms we use to designate particular shades. When red appears in phenomenal experience, Peirce explains, it is always confounded with texture, light, and perspective, and thus it does not exist as the sheer redness of red. To illustrate this latter sort of color quality, Peirce turns not to actual objects but to language:

the word *red* means something when I say that the precession of the equinoxes is no more red than it is blue, and . . . it means just what it means when I say that aniline red is red. That mere *quality*, or suchness, is not in itself an occurrence, as seeing a red object is; it is a mere may-be. (1.304)

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<sup>32</sup> John Dewey, a pragmatist alongside Peirce, articulates this insight into the active nature of colors in “Qualitative Thought,” in *The Later Works, 1925-1953*. vol. 5: 1931-32. (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois Univ. Press, 1981), 253. He explains that “red” is not a property that belongs to an object or a subject but rather a capacity to “redden.” Gilles Deleuze makes a similar point in *The Logic of Sense* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1990), 21: “‘*The tree greens*’—is this not finally the sense of the color of the tree; and is not ‘*the tree greens*’ its global meaning?”

Because language deals with abstractions and literature works with possibilities, they might activate the virtual character of Firsts. Crane signals his own investment in the referential effects of color words through phrases that attach qualitative color to explosive speech acts. The tall soldier's "black procession of curious oaths," the lieutenant's "blue haze of curses," the youth's "outburst of crimson oaths," and the "red letters of curious revenge" Henry imagines all offer occasions in which language assumes the quality or affect of color (113, 185, 211, 189).<sup>33</sup> These linguistic shades are not visible in any literal sense but they inject a qualitative distinctiveness into the scenes that "colors" the reading experience. They are colored not because they look colored but because they are imbued with the potency of the blueness of blue or the blackness of black. Crane leaves the direct presentation of varied hues to the visual artists and focuses instead on the manner in which color words activate and manipulate the very "color-ness" of colors as separated from their actual appearances. His writing investigates color in order to achieve a becoming-colorful of language.

Crane emphasizes that literature deals with colors in their abstract potentiality rather than in their concrete manifestations. The experience of literary texts concerns Firsts rather than Seconds; it approaches color as a "mere may-be," a capacity to become actualized in a reading event.<sup>34</sup> His virtual colors form virtual landscapes—impossible

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<sup>33</sup> Paul Paine's parody, entitled "The Blue Blotch of Cowardice: An Incident of the Pursuit of Insurgents, with Profuse Apologies to Mr. Stephen Crane," focuses on this aspect of Crane's writing. In the lampoon, a Spanish cavalier "mutter[s] mild green curses" at one point, and at another finds that his "chameleon curse turned to a light yellow, owing to the proximity of a pot of Spanish mustard." The parody offers its most incisive—and perceptive—jab when it tells of a lieutenant who "look[s] over his stock of oaths, but could find none of the precise shade that he wanted." Paul Paine, "The Blue Blotch of Cowardice," *Life* 23 (April 1896), 332.

<sup>34</sup> Peirce's system provides an account of the distinctiveness of literary language by classifying literary signs as "symbolic rhemes," Thirds that have Firsts as their interpretants. For an extended treatment of Peirce's semiotic and its explanation of the connection between the sensations, affects, and possibilities

only in the sense that they are unable to be localized in particular objects or subjects. Crane makes their “impossibility” their virtue: a separateness from preexisting instantiations of visual *qualia* and thus a capacity to remain open to unfolding and novel ways of perceiving and feeling colors. Thus, Crane’s most interesting colors are not those that we “see” but those that we read. Such a distinction keeps us from two traps into which previous Crane criticism has fallen: either naively treating color in literature as analogous to color in visual experience (taking Crane’s color tactics too literally) or reducing his color terms to moments of breakage and thus rendering Crane’s palette in black and white (the deconstructionist urge to emphasize the materiality of the scene of writing). However much Crane might be interested in the gaps and slippages in language or in the corporeality of black ink on a white page, he relies upon and cultivates the habitual associations that link “red,” “yellow,” and “blue” with their respective *qualia*. This account explains Crane’s preference for primary hues over more precise shades: the habits for these terms are stronger, our sense of their qualities more vivid. We may see the world in nuanced tones, but we process it in a limited range of color designations, many of which come to us in simplified form from the time we are children. Crane’s writing both activates and tests these habits as part of an exploration of our experiences of generalized colors and their linguistic signs.

“The Broken-Down Van,” after all, does not set the precedent in Crane. Instead, it reveals how often the connections between colors and the words that designate them hold. *The Red Badge of Courage* depends upon these bonds, even as it manipulates them by extracting physiological or psychological effects of color from the actual perception of

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associated with Firstness and the mediating symbols (Thirds) of language rendered poetic, see my “Experience and Signs: Towards a Pragmatist Literary Criticism,” *New Literary History* 39.1 (winter 2008): 165-83.



colored items. By disconnecting colors from objects and reaffixing them to abstract nouns or events, Crane shows his interest in and use of their sensual and affective—rather than the purely visual—character. He approaches color in its virtuality, in its abstractness, and employs it as a qualitative force that permeates his language and engenders new associations and connections to be taken up in an engagement with his work.

In “An Illusion in Red and White” (1900), Crane turns a gruesome tale of ax murder into a parable of colors felt and imagined but not seen. The story offers an account of how Farmer Jones—a man with gray hair, brown teeth, and hands “the color of black walnut”—murdered his wife in plain view of their children and then convinced the young eyewitnesses that they had seen “a man with red hair and big white teeth and real white hands” wielding the ax. The narrator, “one of the brightening stars of New York journalism,” supposes that Jones directed his children’s confused minds with leading questions packed with vivid color imagery. He guesses that the farmer created a narrative that carried the palpability of actual perceptions by repeatedly asking if the murderer had “very red hair” and bright white teeth and by claiming to have glimpsed such a man leaving the house after the crime. The journalist stresses the amount of conjecture in his account: “this is how I imagine it happened.”<sup>35</sup> As such, the narrative presents a writer’s imagining of the powers of the imagination; the illusion holds interest for Crane insofar as it demonstrates the ability of color words to foster imaginative experiences with a vividness that outstrips that of physical reality.

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<sup>35</sup> Stephen Crane, “An Illusion in Red and White,” *The Works of Stephen Crane*, Vol. 8 (Charlottesville, VA: Univ. of Virginia Press, 1969), 155, 154, 157.

If Crane's "Experiment" emphasizes the direct sensory appeal of colors and his "Illusion" demonstrates how such appeals might be accessed entirely through ideas, his flags mark out the space of aesthetics between these poles of sensation and thought. Flags in general illustrate color's tendency to slide from pure sensation into cultural convention—a symbol for some emotion, nation, or team—and Henry Fleming's rush to take up the fallen colors of his regiment indicates the effects of aesthetically-arranged and culturally-endowed chromatic displays. In Chapter XIX, as the youth runs just far enough ahead of the flag-bearer to put himself next to the tilted colors, a "despairing fondness" for the flag stirs within him. "It was a creation of beauty and invulnerability," pines the free indirect discourse; "It was a goddess . . . a woman, red and white, hating and loving, that called him with the voice of his hopes" (186). Crane links the youth's intense feelings to the flag's aesthetic status (a "creation of beauty") and to its insensible character (its "invulnerability"). He portrays the shades of the banner as insensate objects that become sensible—that is, ready to be sensed—through a creative arrangement that intensifies their qualities and directs them towards a cultural association (goddess, woman, and so on). Thus Crane reveals an issue crucial to his literary efforts: the way in which the intelligent arrangement of physical qualities produces new meanings or cultural associations that take their place within experience. In capturing color for literature, he arrives at an understanding of experience as a complex intermingling of sensation and meaning, and at a model of cultural production that places writing at their crux.

Crane develops and expresses this aesthetic through his colors; other late-nineteenth-century writers arrived at similar theories using impressions. As such, it is

here, and not in an emphasis on pure sensation, that critics should locate the meaning of Crane's impressionism. As Jesse Matz explains, turn-of-the-century literary Impressionists believed that "fiction should locate itself where we 'have an impression': not in sense, nor in thought, but in the feeling that comes between."<sup>36</sup> Such intermediary feelings—the impressions that capture the distinctiveness of a situation or individual—recall those other late-nineteenth-century border-dwellers, qualia. The intermingling of sense perception with language and thought presented in qualia distinguishes the literary impression from its painterly cousin: where the former pushes writing away from sheer sensation onto another level of abstraction, the latter pulls painting towards a presentation of pure perception.<sup>37</sup> One is a First, the other a Second. Previous accounts of Crane's impressionism overlook this distinction; they characterize his project with concepts and objectives developed by visual artists in pursuit of immediacy and lose sight of his interest in experiences that have the palpability of sensation and yet are accessed through thought. Thus, when Sergio Perosa claims that for Crane, "[r]eality exists and can be artistically recreated in that it affects [Henry's] eyes, his ears, his touch—his sensory, rather than mental, imagination," he misses the insight of Crane's style: that reality offers only mixtures of sensory and mental elements and that literary practice affects each from the aesthetic space of imaginative writing.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Jesse Matz, *Literary Impressionism and Modernist Aesthetics* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2001), 1. Matz's insightful and well-historicized account of how theories of the impression propelled literary projects in Britain provides the version of literary impressionism most suited to Crane's style.

<sup>37</sup> For a more thorough analysis of the differences between impressionism in literature and painting along these lines, see Matz, *Literary Impressionism and Modernist Aesthetics*, 44-52, 239-49.

<sup>38</sup> Sergio Perosa, "Naturalism and Impressionism in Stephen Crane's Fiction," in Bassan, *Stephen Crane: A Collection of Critical Essays*, 88.

To call Crane's colors impressionist, then, is to hold that the characteristics of his chroma emerge from and relate to his dynamic conceptions of experience and art. Through novels such as *The Red Badge of Courage* and stories such as "An Illusion in Red and White" and "The Broken-Down Van," Crane uses colors to paint the elements of experience as simultaneously mental and physical, full of the vivacity of sensation and the richness of meaning, and open to an aesthetic reconstruction that creates new objects of experience by redirecting attention and intensifying constituent parts. He locates reality, like his colors, not in the properties of objects or in the phenomena of subjects but in the relational components of an evolving event. Critical projects attentive to these ideas underlying Crane's practice might proceed by assuming an equally dynamic view of literature's relation to other areas of material culture. Rather than trace the hidden cultural logics and ideologies that uncover the meaning of a writer's work, such accounts would attempt to grasp the many ways in which writing transforms the energy of its context into a literary style that then enables new encounters with the non-literary world. These methods can best illuminate Crane's project of bringing writing into an encounter with the visual arts that does not mimic them but rather takes potencies and potentials from them to increase the possibilities for literature. When faced with accounts of blue shadows in the snow, critics need not proclaim them either as indications of naïve artistic genius or as products of conceptual distortion. Rather, they need only to attend to the complexities of sensations, feelings, and ideas in such experiences and to dare—in spite of Goethe's warning—to follow the thoughts that colors enable.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Oz and the Upset Ink-Bottle:

#### The Production and Consumption of a Child's View of Color

For John Ruskin, the realm of art is like the kingdom of heaven: to enter, you must become as a little child. In a footnote to the first exercise in *The Elements of Drawing* (1857), Ruskin insists that the visual world comprises nothing but “flat colors” devoid of form, which the average adult then interprets as solid, three-dimensional objects. “The whole technical power of painting,” he continues, “depends on our recovery of what may be called the *innocence of the eye*; that is to say, a sort of childish perception of these flat stains of colour, merely as such, without consciousness of what they signify.” Only when “reduced [. . .] to this condition of infantine sight” can the artist truly *see* the world apart from the habitual categories—linguistic and cultural—that mould the perceptual field. Take, for instance, a patch of grass: “when grass is lighted strongly by the sun in certain directions, it is turned from green into a peculiar and somewhat dusty-looking yellow,” not unlike the hue of primroses. Yet in surveying a field of sunlit grass, the adult observer would describe the dominant color as green rather than sulphur-yellow. Why? Because everyone *knows* that grass is green, and “we always suppose that we *see* what we only know.” The cure for this concept-heavy vision is the fresh perspective of the child, the simple and unsophisticated gaze that registers “the

colours of nature exactly as they are.”<sup>1</sup> With this appeal to the child’s know-nothing view of color, Ruskin forged one of the most enduring tropes of modernist art: from Whistler and Monet to the Fauvists and the Bauhaus group, the “innocent eye” provided painters with both a mode of aesthetic perception (that of the child) and a way to trigger it (pure color).<sup>2</sup> Art’s empiricism, its access to nature “as it is,” rested on its ability to capture the fresh sight of babies, to see the world rather than to know it.<sup>3</sup>

What Ruskin celebrated as the essence of artistic vision, Charles Darwin mistook as colorblindness. In the German edition of “A Biographical Sketch of an Infant” (1877), the famous naturalist reported that some of his children, even after they had learned the words for “all the ordinary things,” “appeared to be entirely incapable of giving the right names to the colors of a color etching.” Though he had earlier noted that a “bright-coloured tassel” had captured his son’s attention at only seven weeks old, this consistent flubbing of color-naming led Darwin to question his children’s sensitivity to color

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<sup>1</sup> John Ruskin, *The Works of John Ruskin*, vol. 15 [*The Elements of Drawing*], p.27-28. Emphasis in original.

<sup>2</sup> For a study of a handful of modern artists who develop this trope through an engagement with the drawings of children, see Jonathan Fineberg’s *The Innocent Eye: Children’s Art and the Modern Artist* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 1997). Key examples include Paul Klee’s injunction to look for the roots of modern art “at home in one’s nursery”; Kazimir Malevich’s characterization of non-objective art as aspiring to the perceptual state of the child, who “loves bright colours and perceives them in their pure form”; and Picasso’s remark, made to Herbert Read while viewing an exhibition of children’s drawings that “[w]hen I was a child I drew like Raphael. I have been trying to draw like these children ever since.” See E. H. Gombrich, *The Preference for the Primitive: Episodes in the History of Western Taste and Art* (New York: Phaidon, 2002) for Klee (261-63) and Picasso (236-37); see John Gage, *Color in Art* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2006) for Malevich (65). Other artists draw on the characteristics of childish perception without explicitly invoking the infant; for instance, Henri Matisse, in “Notes of a Painter” (1908) insists that a painter’s use of color should be grounded in sensory experience rather than in objective knowledge of colors. He disparages Paul Signac for being too tied to “theoretical knowledge” and prefers painters “whose knowledge of colours depends upon instinct and feeling.” Henri Matisse, “Notes of a Painter” [1908], in *Matisse on Art*, ed. Jack Flam (Berkeley, CA: Univ. of California Press, 1995), 41.

<sup>3</sup> In *Suspensions of Perception* (1999), Jonathan Crary situates Ruskin’s invocation of the “innocent eye” and the tradition of “pure perception”—to use Pater’s phrase—within the emergence of attention as an area of psychological, medical, and philosophical inquiry. Though he avoids dealing with the figure of the child, his analysis calls upon many of the characteristics of artistic perception invoked by Ruskin, Kandinsky, Picasso, and others when they reference the child’s view of color. Crary, *Suspensions of Perception: Attention, Spectacle, and Modern Culture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999).

stimuli. With time, however, “this turned out to be an ungrounded apprehension.”<sup>4</sup> The kids had seen the hues on the etching just fine; in fact, as the lesson of the tassel teaches, they had distinguished the colors even before they had identified the world of “ordinary things.” Darwin’s children were being Ruskinian artists, perceiving the color etching in all of its particularity, but their father measured this “infantine sight” against the adult categories for knowing and communicating visual experience. Darwin’s temporary blunder arose from his assumption that color language provided a reliable index of color perceptions, and it was precisely this assumption—shared by a range of Victorian psychologists, anthropologists, and literary critics—that child psychology would explode over the next quarter-century.<sup>5</sup> The finer parsing of color experience into its various sensory and conceptual registers became a crucial feature of psychological studies of children, and these pursuits turned the figure of the child-absorbed-in-color into a staging ground for investigations of how an intense sensory experience interfaces with a culture’s linguistic structures.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Charles Darwin, [A Biographical Sketch of a Young Infant]. *Kosmos* 1 (1877), 376. Darwin reports his unfounded worries about his children’s vision in the German edition of “A Biographical Sketch of an Infant”; I have used the translation provided by Marc H. Bornstein in his “On the Development of Color Naming in Young Children: Data and Theory” in *Brain and Language* 26 (1985): 72-93. The anecdote about the colored tassel appears in the English version (286), published in *Mind* 2.7 (June 1877): 285-94.

<sup>5</sup> This conflation first gained widespread attention after William Gladstone, in *Studies on Homer and the Homeric Age* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1858), applied it in a work of literary criticism. In a section titled “Homer’s Perceptions and Use of Colour,” Gladstone argues that the great Greek poet’s color terms, which emphasized brightness over hue, betrayed “signs of immaturity” indicative of an “undeveloped” color sense (458, 495). Homer’s failure, for instance, to name the sky “blue” (he prefers “iron,” “copper,” and “starry”), suggests that his perceptual equipment did not detect colors in the same way as the modern Victorian’s. Thus, Gladstone concludes that “the perceptions so easy and familiar to us are the results of slow traditional growth in knowledge and in the training of the human organ, which commenced long before we took our place in the succession of mankind” (495-96). For a discussion of the parameters and influence of Gladstone’s argument and the debates that followed, see Sigmund Skard, *The Uses of Color in Literature: A Survey of Research* (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1946), 166-69.

<sup>6</sup>As Marc H. Bornstein explains, children and color continue to serve as interesting sites of inquiry for neurolinguistics and developmental psychology: “The fact that children perceive categories of hue, but initially color name inconsistently and inaccurately poses yet another set of potentially developmental

Ruskin's championing of the child's view of color and Darwin's fear for his children's vision both invoke the intense, immediate, and inarticulate experience of bright hues thought to be the exclusive purview of the young. In this way, they work within the cultural fields cleared by their Romantic predecessors, who cast childhood as a time of wide-eyed apprehension and spontaneous delight in the sensory world; they accept Goethe's assertion, in *Theory of Colours* (1810), that children exhibit "a great predilection for vivid colours," a trait shared with "savage nations" and "uneducated people."<sup>7</sup> But where Ruskin uses the *figure* of the child to make the case for a pure form of artistic perception, Darwin deals with actual children—children who will grow up and take their place in society. Thus the distinction between them is not that of the artist and the scientist (such categories, after all, were muddled in both their writings and overlapped most clearly in the emphasis on careful observation). Instead, it is the distance between the child's view of color understood as a set of perceptual capacities immanent to all experience and the child's view of color treated as a particular stage of growth that cannot, in itself, initiate the individual into the bustling world of sign-filled, mediated social relations. If Ruskin's legacy encompasses Matisse, Klee, and the oft-heard bromide about modern art—"My kid could paint that"—Darwin constitutes a moment in the tradition of developmental psychology that eventually combined with Romantic pedagogy to shape the educational practices of the turn of the twentieth century. They offer insights into the concepts and concerns about language and

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question for the interrelationship of brain, language, and thought." Marc H. Bornstein, "On the Development of Color Naming in Young Children," *Brain and Language* 26 (1985), 74. Bornstein contends that this gap between color perception and color semantics in children stems from the lag between the development of the cortical neurological structures that support color perceptions (which are present in infancy) and the maturation of those required for color naming.

<sup>7</sup> Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Theory of Colours* (1810), trans. Charles Eastlake (London: John Murray, 1840), 55.



perception, knowledge and experience, that shaped the solidification of a relation between children and color in the nineteenth century, one that persists in every preschool and Kindergarten in the United States.

Indeed, color and kids go hand-in-hand. Children seem more child-like when absorbed in bright hues, and colors seem more colorful when seen by a child. Yet this link, at least as old as Rousseau, acquired many of its most familiar characteristics through the technological innovations, cultural discourses, and aesthetic practices developed in the generation after Ruskin and Darwin. Before children could be so closely associated with their own colorful productions, construction paper, crayons, and colored chalk had to be mass-produced; before they could be enticed with brightly-colored books and toys, the inks and dyes for such products had to be rendered durable and inexpensive; and before their instinctual delight in vibrant hues could be recommended to educators, a whole network of psychological methods and equipment had to develop in universities and laboratories. The color-loving child, then, was the benefactor of a whole host of modern phenomena, and its development encompasses not only the modern art gallery but also the Kindergarten classroom, the advertising studio, and psychology lab. At each site, saturated hues and fixated children provided the content and the form of a perceptual absorption that engaged viewers on sensory and affective registers, beneath the threshold of consciousness. Yet this “pure perception” did not exist in isolation; instead, as Darwin’s concern for his kids makes plain, the discourses and practices surrounding children and color addressed the ways in which pre- or non-linguistic sensation gives way to or combines with conceptual processing. Such investigations both responded to and directed the proliferation of mass media forms that

brought image and text together to appeal to the “child eye” latent in all adults. In all of these areas, the infantile immersion in vivid color frames inquiries into language’s relation to the sensory image—inquiries that were grounded in material culture and infused with philosophical import.

No single work captures this dense weave of turn-of-the-century discourses and practices like the first edition of *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* (1900), written by L. Frank Baum and illustrated by W. W. Denslow. Both a visual and narrative project, the original *Oz* combined the latest color print technology with psychological and pedagogical understandings of how children experience color, and, as a result, produced a book that incorporated and helped to shape the modern ideal of the child’s view of color. Yet for all the ink spilled over *Oz*’s hues, literary critics remain woefully inattentive to the multimedia components of Baum and Denslow’s book.<sup>8</sup> In overlooking the most salient features of the book’s design, they have foreclosed analysis both of *Oz*’s place within turn-of-the-century visual culture and of the ways in which it frames questions about the interplay between perception and language, image and text that would occupy modernist writers and painters in the years that followed. Reinstating Denslow’s contribution to *Oz* constitutes the first step in opening up these areas for inquiry. Once approached as both a picture book and a fairy tale, and considered in light of the diverse types of engagement it elicits from its child readers, the original *Oz* illuminates a cultural network that links printing presses and progressive pedagogy, advertisements and modern art, all through an attention to the “infantine sight” of vivid hues. In other words, *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* reveals the materials assembled at the turn of the century to produce an influential and

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<sup>8</sup> In this essay, I will reserve “text” for Baum’s narrative and use “book” to denote the full collaborative project of *Oz*.

highly consumable version of a child's view of color, one that extends the tropes presented by Ruskin and Darwin into the cultural world of the early twentieth century. Baum and Denslow thus provide an analytical matrix through which to approach the modernist aesthetics of the 1910s and '20s, and in doing so their collaborations exemplify—even as they alter—Walter Benjamin's meditations on the colorful spectacle of consumer capitalism and its relation to the "child's view of color" he hailed as "the highest artistic development of the sense of sight."<sup>9</sup>

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Thirty-nine years before MGM wowed moviegoers with the sudden switch from sepia-toned Kansas to Technicolor Oz, L. Frank Baum and W. W. Denslow mustered



Figure 1 (AWO plate 8)

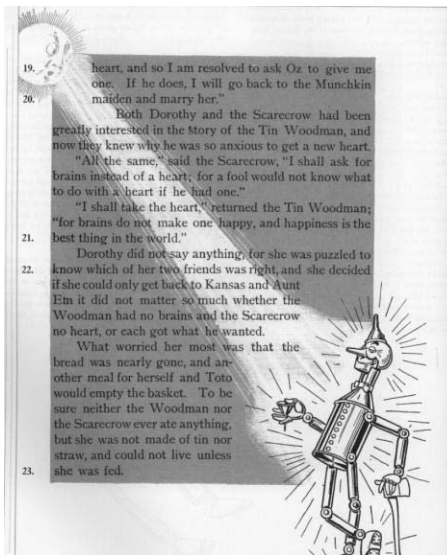


Figure 2 (AWO 102)

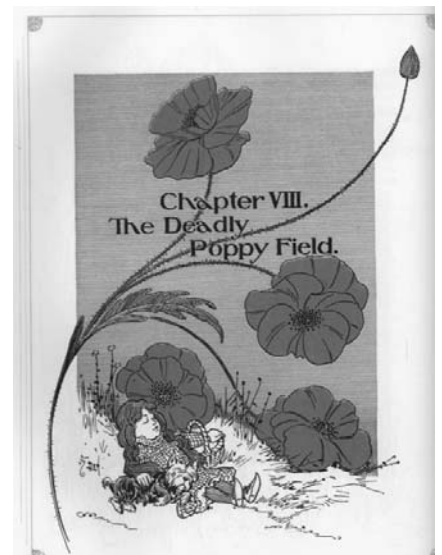


Figure 3 (AWO 130)

modern print technologies and design techniques to create a similarly color-charged spectacle. With twenty-four full-color plates interspersed between one-hundred-and-thirty monochrome drawings, *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* outshone every other

<sup>9</sup> Walter Benjamin, "A Child's View of Color" [1914-15], in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, Vol. 1: 1913-1926*, eds. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard Univ. Press), 50. Hereafter cited parenthetically as "CVC."

children's book on the market, and reviewers never failed to remark on the book's "uncommon" images and "wild riots of color."<sup>10</sup> Indeed, Baum and Denslow based their hopes for the book's success on its physical appearance, even going so far as to pay out of pocket for color plates when the publisher deemed them too expensive (*AWO* xxxii, xxxvii). In 1899, the duo had scored a bestseller with *Father Goose, His Book*, a collection of Baum's nursery rhymes hand-lettered to resemble miniature art posters, and for their second collaboration they sought to heighten the visual appeal that had made their first work so popular. If *Father Goose* had set a new color standard for juvenile literature—few books for children had been printed in color before 1899, and those that were used cheap, old-fashioned chromolithographs—*Oz* would raise the bar even higher: to *Father Goose*'s limited palette of yellow, red, gray, and black, Denslow added blue, green, and brown for the textual illustrations and even more for the full-color pages (qtd. in *AWO*).<sup>11</sup> Baum in particular was enthusiastic about *Oz*'s hues: writing to his brother Harry about the book's upcoming publication, he boasted, "Denslow has made profuse illustrations for it, and it will glow with bright colors" (qtd. in *AWO* xl). But this happy alliance between author and illustrator soon gave way to bickering over who was most responsible for *The Wizard*'s success. The partnership dissolved, and Baum's resentment—teamed with the expense of reprinting the book in all of its original

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<sup>10</sup> Not only did *Oz* outshine all the other children's books; it also outsold them. Baum and Denslow had the top-selling children's book of the 1900 Christmas season, going through more than 90,000 copies in a matter of months (*AWO* xli). Qtd. in Michael Patrick Hearn, *The Annotated Wizard of Oz: The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*. (New York: Norton and Co., 2000), xliii; qtd. in Douglas G. Greene and Michael Patrick Hearn, *W. W. Denslow*, Introduction by Patricia Denslow Eykyn (Mount Pleasant, MI: Clarke Historical Library, Central Michigan University Press), 94. Citations to Hearn's *Annotated Oz* will appear parenthetically as *AWO*; citations to Greene's and Hearn's *W. W. Denslow* will appear parenthetically as *WWD*.

<sup>11</sup> As Denslow's biographers note, the few children's books that did feature color plates before *Father Goose*, "such as the cheaply lithographed McLoughlin Brothers books," had "little sense of design" and employed "mediocre artists" (*WWD* 84).

splendor—ensured that subsequent editions of *Oz* appeared with different illustrations or with no drawings whatsoever. As a result, the collaborative component of the original edition was effaced; the text was detached from its colors; and critics approached Baum’s narrative in the absence of—or without regard for—Denslow’s images.<sup>12</sup>

Yet the book resists this disentangling of its various colors. One of the wonders of *The Wonderful Wizard* is its interweaving of illustrations and text, its thorough

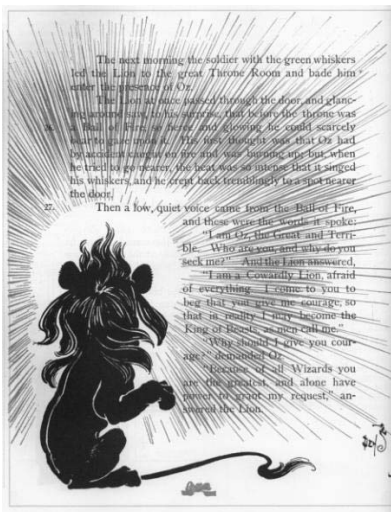


Figure 4 (AWO 196)

intermingling of Denslow’s drawings with the printed words of Baum’s tale. To one reviewer, this mélange of word and image “suggest[ed] the upset ink-bottle,” and surely some of the most saturated pages of *Oz* run the risk of occluding the words in favor of the colors (qtd. in AWO xliii). (Figures 5 and 6) But even as they jostle, the hues on the page and those of the story seek to harmonize with

one another. Baum divides his fantasy world into color-coded regions: the blue land of the Munchkins, the green-spectacled views of Oz, the yellow territory in the west, and the red domain of the Quadlings—all, of

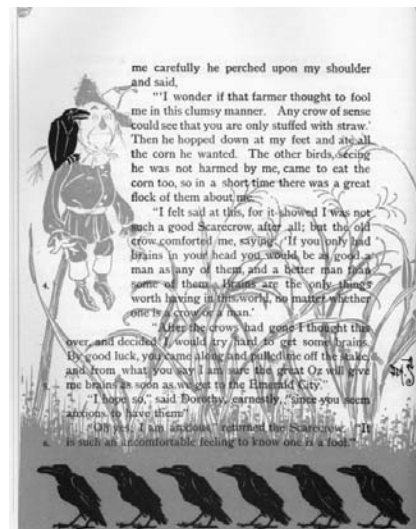


Figure 5 (AWO 80)

<sup>12</sup> Baum and Denslow held *Oz* in joint copyright: the former owned the text and the latter owned the images. As a curious consequence of the disputes between author and illustrator, *Oz*’s most memorable characters, especially the popular Scarecrow and Tin Wood-Man, lived dual lives in the early years of the twentieth century, one with Baum in his subsequent tales of Oz and another in the illustrated pages of newspapers and magazines, where Denslow furthered the antics of his drawn characters in occasional pieces that culminated in the pointedly titled *Denslow’s Scarecrow and the Tin-Man* (1904). For the friendship, collaboration, and legal disputes of Baum and Denslow, see Hearn (AWO xxviii-lvi).

course, set apart from the “great gray prairie” of Kansas. And as his characters pass from one area to another, Denslow’s illustrations change hue to match the setting. Thus, the opening illustrations of Aunt Em and the cyclone are grey; the drawings of Dorothy’s fortuitous fall among the Munchkins are blue; the Great Wizard appears in green; and so on. The colors, like the rest of the book, resulted from a true collaboration, and both Baum and Denslow composed their portions of the project with the other’s work in mind. In this way, *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* was unique among illustrated books at the turn of the century, including the subsequent installments in the Oz series. After the falling out with Denslow, Baum never allowed his other illustrators (such as John R. Neill) to be more than mere embellishers of the prose. He kept his stories detachable from the images, and critics have applied this later separation to the original collaboration.<sup>13</sup>

Removed from their multimedia context, Baum’s colors have been treated like so many other literary hues: as symbols or signs for something other than color. Some, such as Martin Gardner, simply assert the “symbolic” properties of *Oz*’s tones, while more inventive readers turn them into commentaries on turn-of-the-century culture. Henry M. Littlefield, for instance, reads the tale’s yellows, silvers, and greens as parts of a “Parable on Populism,” and William Leach connects the sheer abundance of color in the narrative to the sumptuous displays of consumer capitalism. The temptation to make sense of these colors even leads Matthew Hearn, who had earlier declared that “[t]here is no great symbolic meaning to the color scheme of *Oz*,” to cast the hues as demonstrations of color theory and as analogues of the passing seasons—each an attempt to endow Baum’s tones

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<sup>13</sup> Reflecting on the experience of seeing his own characters used against him, Baum remarked to his publishers that “having learned my lesson from my unfortunate experiences with Denslow, I will never permit another artist to have an interest in the drawings he makes of my described characters, if I can help it” (Qtd. in *AWO* liii).

with purpose and meaning beyond their simple status as colors.<sup>14</sup> Yet rather than act as ahistorical components of a commentary on culture, *Oz*'s colors are inseparable from the cultural history of the turn-of-the-century; they rely on a range of discourses and practices interested in the psychological and pedagogical effects of bright hues. Such correctives do not shut down critical investigation but instead redirect it towards an analysis of how the interlocking color-images and color-words of *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* relate to late-nineteenth-century beliefs about the unthinking, childlike receptivity bright hues excite even in adults and to the aesthetic and commercial practices that attempted to harness it. The meeting of Baum's color terms and Denslow's color pictures, then, presses literary criticism to generate an approach sensitive to the material components of cultural discourse, the non-linguistic elements that press at the boundaries of literature.

### **Impressionism for Babies**

In a 1905 interview, Francis Hodgson Burnett cited "the terrible confusion of color that was used in picture books for children in the old days" as evidence of an outmoded understanding of childhood. "Just think of the horrible, splashy greens and yellows and blues that were put before a child in picture books," she declares; such abominations resulted from a misunderstanding of the child mind, a failure to consider the visual effects of the books on the young eye.<sup>15</sup> Two years earlier, art critic J. M.

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<sup>14</sup> Henry M. Littlefield, "The Wizard of Oz: Parable on Populism" in *The American Culture*, ed. Hennig Cohen. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1968). For a discussion of the reception and critiques of this influential article, see Hearn's *Annotated Oz* (xc). For Hearn's own color-scheming, see (AWO 61). William Leach, *The Land of Desire: Merchants, Power, and the Rise of a New American Culture* (New York: Vintage, 1993), 252. Hereafter cited *LD*.

<sup>15</sup> Pendennis, "Mrs. Hodgson Burnett's Plea for the Child," *New York Times* Mar. 19, 1905 SM3.

Bowles lodged a similar complaint against children's literature as part of his profile of W. W. Denslow. "In no other field has the real fitness of things to their uses been so flagrantly disregarded as in the making of books for children," he asserts.<sup>16</sup> Despite the "many special endeavors [. . .] to put forth works of art for the delectation of the child mind," the majority of illustrators, according to Bowles, miss the "most important point in educational method": "that the art must be reduced to the child's understanding to be of any real value or enjoyment to him" ("CBC" 377, 378). He joins Burnett in condemning the "old monstrosities of picture-books" for their haphazard designs that "outrage[] the color sense," and then goes further by dismissing even the accomplished works of Boutet de Monvel and Kate Greenaway for requiring an "educated eye," "a developed sense for exquisite form and refined color" unavailable to young readers ("CBC" 380, 378).<sup>17</sup> Artists who draw for children, Bowles insists, must learn to "be truly simple for a child's mind and eye"; they must bend their styles to the mental and perceptual capacities of their viewers rather than work within the canons of adult art. The first rule: adopt "a palette limited to strong colors" because children "love color," especially "vivid and striking color" ("CBC" 380, 379).

For Bowles, the simplified forms and bold color patches that characterize Denslow's work for children exemplify the lineaments of an artistic style fashioned especially for kids. As a newspaper illustrator and art poster designer, Denslow had abandoned the cross-hatching and detail of his contemporaries in favor of the strong lines

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<sup>16</sup> J. M. Bowles, "Children's Books for Children," *Brush and Pencil* XII.6 (September 1903), 377. Subsequent citations will appear parenthetically as "CBC."

<sup>17</sup> Where Burnett simply acknowledges a shift in style (and approves of the increase in quality), Bowles offers a rubric, grounded in child psychology, for evaluating the appropriateness of art aimed at children.



and flat backgrounds he admired in Japanese woodcuts.<sup>18</sup> Such techniques are on full display in *Father Goose*, but it wasn't until *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* presented him with the opportunity for monochrome color work on nearly every page that Denslow developed his most child-friendly trait: abstract blocks of pure hue that float on the page, bearing no relation to the objects or characters of the narrative. Speaking of these “cleverly disposed spots and masses of color scattered throughout the Denslow books,” Bowles reports that he “[has] seen a baby of twelve months beam with delight as some of these pages were turned, and fairly jump at the color deliberately placed by the crafty Mr. Denslow” (“CBC” 382). These patches prove that Denslow recognizes the visual capacities of his audience; he recognizes that “[t]he baby goes for vivid color, if for no other reason than he sees it first,” and he therefore creates a powerful palette to “arouse these little emotions” (“CBC” 380, 382). Surely Baum had this feature in mind when he designated the mission of the Oz books as that of “reflect[ing] the world as it appears to the eye and imagination of a child” (qtd. in *AWO* xcv).<sup>19</sup>

Bowles's assessment of Denslow's drawings specifies *Oz*'s incorporation of a decade's worth of psychological research into the mental and visual experience of infants, much of which marked the child eye as especially attracted to bright hues. In the 1890s, a flurry of interest in the psychic lives of children emerged as a consequence of

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<sup>18</sup> Japanese prints had a widespread influence on modern artists at the end of the nineteenth century. Yet before the likes of Elbert Hubbard began to tout their virtues, Denslow had already become enamored of the clean, simple designs of the Tokumgawa, or “Floating World” style while working in San Francisco in the 1880s. In the subsequent decades, as art nouveau embraced the Japanese aesthetic, Denslow found his work suddenly in vogue—though as a way of insisting on his own originality, he maintained a careful distance from the new style, often mocking its excesses, even as he benefited from its popularity. For more on Denslow's time in San Francisco and his relation to Japanese art and art nouveau, see Greene and Hearn, *W. W. Denslow*, 24-28.

<sup>19</sup> Baum made this comment to his friend Dr. Edwin P. Ryland, who later published it in a memoir of *Oz*'s inventor.

psychology's integration of evolutionary thought. Once researchers began to conceive of the mind as a process of growth rather than as a static substance, the early stages of mental development, previously dismissed as too rudimentary or crude to be of scientific interest, were regarded as essential windows into the formative moments of all human cognition.<sup>20</sup> Child psychologists such as G. Stanley Hall, James Mark Baldwin, and Oscar Chrisman argued that an empirical understanding of how children engage the world could correct the gross mistakes made in the training, education, and upbringing of the young—mistakes attributable to the faulty assumption that kids are just little adults.<sup>21</sup> Under the broad banner of “Child Study,” then, psychologists established the child as a subject of scientific scrutiny, and in so doing they naturalized the constituents of childhood celebrated by Friedrich Froebel and other Romantic pedagogues: play, spontaneity, sensory receptiveness, and, importantly, a delight in vivid colors.<sup>22</sup> A

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<sup>20</sup> In *The Mental Development of the Child and the Race* (New York: Macmillan, 1895), James Baldwin attributes “the psychological renaissance of the last twenty-five or thirty years” to “the rise of the evolution idea” (1-2), and G. Stanley Hall presents the highest aspirations of Child Study as that of “carry[ing] evolution into the higher plane of the soul.” G. Stanley Hall, “Child Study and Its Relation to Education,” *Forum* (August 1900), 695-96.

<sup>21</sup> G. Stanley Hall, *Adolescence* (1904); Baldwin, *The Mental Development of the Child and the Race* (1895).

<sup>22</sup> In its heyday between 1890 and 1910, Child Study constituted an interdisciplinary endeavor that combined psychology, physiology, pedagogy, and anthropology; it involved both “bringing the child into the laboratory” and “utilizing the nursery as a laboratory.” Oscar Chrisman, “Child-Study, A New Department of Education” (*Forum*, Feb. 1894), 728; Annie Howes Barus, “Methods and Difficulties of Child-Study” (*Forum*, Sept. 1895), 113. As these complementary formulations suggest, investigations of the child's mental and physical development were undertaken both by professionals and by interested parents. Though some initially worried that subjecting the children to experiments seemed somehow cruel, the methods and assumptions of Child Study gained a wide currency in turn-of-the-century culture, and parents were encouraged, in the words of G. Stanley Hall, to “love their children intelligently enough to study them.” G. Stanley Hall, in “Child-Study and Its Relation to Education,” 692. The popularity of the movement can be gauged by the call from *Arthur's Home Magazine* to “form a Mothers' Club [. . .] and discuss the phases of childhood which have come under our personal observation, the predominating characteristics, the best means of developing what is good and eradicating what is not, supplying deficiencies and pruning what is redundant.” “Practical Child Study—I” (1897), 374. Five years later, Agnes Repplier mocked the expanse of manuals and parenting advice that had emerged from Child Study in a short piece for *Life* magazine: if mothers “fail to grasp the tremendous significance of Baby's gurgle, of Dicky's partiality for sugar, and of Mabella's fear of frogs,” she remarks, “it is not because a host of

youthful attraction to bright hues had been noted by previous generations, but in the 1890s such predilections were understood not as markers of a magical or innocent realm of childhood but as expressions of a particular phase of mental development, an effect of an infant's neurological equipment.<sup>23</sup> Thus lodged in the physical body and given empirical weight, the innocent eye's affinity for bright color drove educational, commercial, and—as Burnett and Bowles demonstrate—literary and aesthetic projects.

As a circumscribed and easily tested arena for investigating the perceptual development of children, color attracted many of the most eminent researchers in the field of child psychology and served as a locus for methodological debates.<sup>24</sup> Early studies grounded in the careful observation of individual children, such as William T. Preyer's *The Mind of the Child* (1890), Milicent Washburn Shinn's *Notes on the Development of a Child* (1893-1899), and the aforementioned essay by Darwin, never failed to note the infant's early responses to brightly-colored objects: a rose colored curtain, a dark blue dress, a vivid tassel, or even a standardized color-patch provided by Dr. H. Mangus of Breslau.<sup>25</sup> These first impressions come early, around the third or

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unmarried writers have neglected to point out to them that such things are the key-notes of the soul." Agnes Repplier, "Child Study," *Life* 39 (April 17, 1902), 332. At the most basic level, then, the initiatives and popularity of Child Study led adults to look at their children differently—to observe them as scientists—and to use what they learned for the enhancement of the child's growth.

<sup>23</sup> For an account of how the notions of play and absorption developed through nineteenth-century discussions of childhood, see Gillian Brown's "Child's Play" in *The American Child: A Cultural Studies Reader*, eds. Caroline Levander and Carol J. Singley (New Brunswick: Rutgers Univ. Press, 2003). Brown charts a similar movement from Romantic pedagogy, to late-nineteenth-century psychology (James), and eventually back to Progressive-Era education (Dewey).

<sup>24</sup> In his analysis of the "art instinct" in children, James Sully "dwel[ls] at some length on the first germs of colour-appreciation, because this is the one feature of the child's aesthetic sense which has so far lent itself to definite experimental investigation." James Sully, *Studies of Childhood* (New York: D. Appleton, 1910), 303.

<sup>25</sup> William T. Preyer, *The Mind of the Child; Part One: The Senses and the Will: Observations Concerning the Mental Development of the Human Being in the First Years of Life* [1890] (New York: D. Appleton and Co., 1898), trans. H. W. Brown, 6-22. Preyer's son notes the "rose-colored curtain" when only twenty-three days old; at the sight, he "laughed and uttered sounds of satisfaction" [6]. A couple of years later,

fourth week, which places them soon after the response to bright lights and months before the recognition of form. Having established the approximate point at which this color-sense appears, Preyer and Shinn then tested its development: Did the child see blue or red first? At what point would she see green? As the anecdote about Darwin's children suggests, the initial investigations of these questions relied on the child's verbal reporting to establish the perceptual salience of various hues. Alfred Binet, who later included assessments of color perception in his infamous intelligence tests, observed that these studies foundered on the mistaken conflation of linguistic and visual development; rather than ask kids to say the names of colors, he asked them to point.<sup>26</sup> But James Mark Baldwin, in an essay titled "A New Method of Child Study," argued that once children learned the names for colors, their responses to chromatic stimuli were forever tinged. He therefore proposed that the development of color perception be confined to studies of infants, where the color-sense could be observed in isolation through the hand movements of the young subject.<sup>27</sup> These studies reached opposing conclusions about which color captures the child eye first—Baldwin says blue, others red, and so on—but

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Preyer tested him with the Standardized ovals from Dr. H. Mangus. Milicent Washburn Shinn, *Notes on the Development of a Child* (Berkeley, CA: Univ. of California Press, 1893), 25-56. Shinn's niece fails to respond to a red silk handkerchief at three-and-a-half weeks, but is taken by the blue dress at five weeks. After that, she fixes her gaze on a red gown, yellow and pink flowers, red and yellow ribbons, and any other brightly-colored object within her sight.

<sup>26</sup> In "The Development of Intelligence in the Child," Alfred Binet and Théodore Simon wrote that "[t]he young child distinguishes, recognizes, and easily matches without the least hesitation the most delicate shades of color, and has nothing to envy in the adult so far as his color sense is concerned; it is the verbalization of his color sense, if we may so express it, in which he is defective." Trans. E. S. Kiffe, in H. H. Goddard, ed., *The Development of Intelligence in Children* (Baltimore: Williams & Wilkins, 1908).

<sup>27</sup> James Mark Baldwin, "A New Method of Child Study," *Science* 21.533 (April 14, 1893): 213-14. A revised version of this essay became chapter two of *The Mental Development of the Child and the Race*. Baldwin named his approach the "dynamogenetic" method and insisted that only motor reflexes provide the "true index of the sensory stimulus in its simplicity." Baldwin, *Mental Development*, 43.

Developmental psychology continues to rely upon a version of this method, one that measures eye movement to establish perceptual salience; however, all such tests are now supplemented with—if not replaced by—fMRI images.

each of them limited their stimuli to a narrow range of basic colors: red, blue, green, yellow, brown, and white. Through the course of these debates, child psychologists hit upon their observational methods and, in the process, crystallized an image of the child's experience of color as pre-linguistic, free of conceptual taint, prior to form, and attracted to vibrant shades of basic hues.<sup>28</sup>

It is within this context that Bowles affirms, "Denslow knows the baby mind" ("CBC" 384). The floating masses of vivid color that speckle *Oz*'s pages cater to the earliest manifestations of the color-sense, and Bowles sees them not only as candy for the infant eye but also as visualizations of our earliest perceptual experiences. (*Figures 6 and 7*) In a remarkable passage, Bowles attempts to enter the "baby mind" and give an inside account of the child's view of color:

Were the baby or young child able to analyze and explain to us the causes of his delight in color, it might reason as follows: "Den's panels, circles, and spots, and his solid pages of gorgeous hues with perhaps one tiny figure or object in a lower corner are simply baits to catch my attention through my eye, which as yet gets only general impressions. In other words, my friend Mr. Denslow is an impressionist for babies. He omits all but the fundamentals and essentials. He leaves out of his books everything except things that exist in our own little world of fact." ("CBC" 382-83)

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<sup>28</sup> The debates did not stop with Baldwin. In 1906, Wilibald A. Nagel argued that previous researchers had failed to make the proper distinctions between brightness and hue, and W. H. Winch, four years later, studied English school-children to demonstrate that, under certain conditions, the development of color naming mirrors the development of color perception, even if it occurs at a different moment. Wilibald A. Nagel, "Observations on the Color-Sense of a Child," *Journal of Comparative Neurology and Psychology* 16 (1906), 217-230; W. H. Winch, "Color-Names of English School-Children," *American Journal of Psychology* 21.3 (July 1910): 453-82. As referenced in note 5 above, investigations into the development of color naming continue to interest a wide range of researchers. Marc H. Bornstein explains the allure and scientific utility of such studies: "Color naming has attracted the attention of physicists, physiologists, psychologists, linguists, anthropologists, and philosophers because much is known about the physics of color and the physiology of color vision, because color names represent a small and circumscribed lexical set, and because the linguistics and the physics of color ought to correspond. Indeed, color naming has recommended itself on these bases as a nearly prototypic domain in which to explore the nexus of brain and language. Certainly, many developmental neuropsycholinguists have regarded the color question in this light, viz., as a staging area in which to explore how children master semantics." Bornstein, "On the Development of Color Naming in Young Children: Data and Theory," 88.

In giving voice to the child mind, Bowles has recourse to the language of modern art—a language in which he was quite fluent: in the 1890s, he had edited the journal *Modern*

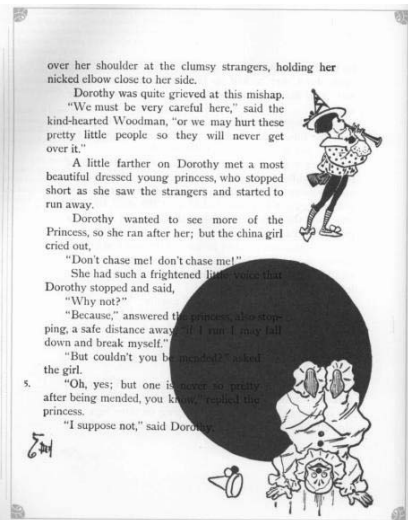


Figure 6 (AWO 322)

*Art*, which served as “a key site for the elaboration and circulation of an emerging modernist aesthetics.”<sup>29</sup> Yet note how both the theory and practice of the “innocent eye” recommended by Ruskin change when passed through the alembic of child psychology. In *The Elements of Drawing*, the “childish” perception of “flat stains of color” called artists

to shirk conceptual habit and see the world as it is; its goal

was to present those fresh impressions in such a way as to convey the sensory experience of actual objects. Never was the child’s view of color meant to push the painter too far into the realm of abstraction. Ruskin, after all, famously condemned Whistler’s aestheticist arrangements of form

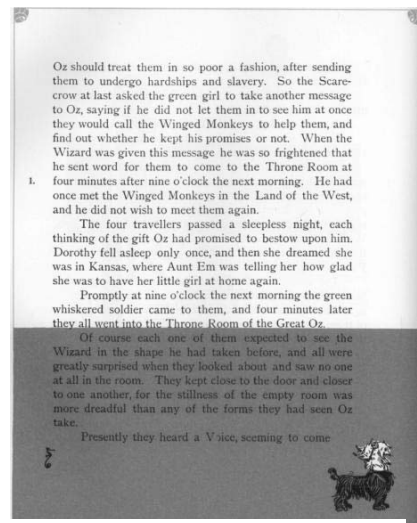


Figure 7 (AWO 256)

<sup>29</sup> J. M. Mancini, *Pre-Modernism: Art-World Change and American Culture from the Civil War to the Amory Show* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 2005), 20. In her first chapter, Mancini offers Bowles’s journal as an exemplar of the mixing of avant-garde and nineteenth-century ideas and techniques that characterized the emergence of modernism in America. Printed by Louis Prang (an entrepreneur known for producing chromolithographs and the first mass-produced Christmas cards) and boasting art work by Arthur Wesley Dow (who later taught Georgia O’Keeffe and photographer Alvin Langdon Coburn), *Modern Art* blended elements from commercial and aesthetic projects and troubles the assumptions—promoted by artists and reiterated by critics—that modern art erupted with a revolutionary break from nineteenth-century conventions, both popular and artistic. I join Mancini in insisting on the emergence of modernism from the cultural and material contexts of the late nineteenth century; it is within this framework that I claim *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* as a precursor to modernist art and writing.

and color.<sup>30</sup> But in the decade following Bowles's essay on Denslow—which specifies the most abstract elements of the *Oz* drawings as the most resonant with the elemental vision of children—post-impressionist painters such as Matisse, Klee, and Kandinsky turned the “simplified” presentation of chromatic blocks bearing no relation to objects into the vanguard of modernist art.<sup>31</sup> The general principle remained unchanged from Ruskin: the child, like the “primitive” with whom it was associated in *Child Study*, provided a fresh perspective that escaped the nets of habit and convention.<sup>32</sup> But since the understanding of what children see had been altered as a result of Preyer, Shinn, Baldwin, and others, the visual results of adopting a child's perspective had also changed.

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<sup>30</sup> The difference between Turner, whom Ruskin championed in *Modern Painters* (1843-1860), and Whistler, whose *Nocturne in Black and Gold: The Falling Rocket* (circa 1872-1877) Ruskin attacked as an affront to art audiences (he wrote that he “never expected to hear a coxcomb ask two hundred guineas for flinging a pot of paint in the public's face”), is that the former ties even his most abstract color studies back to the visual experience of the eye under extreme conditions. Qtd. in Stanley Weintraub, *Whistler: A Biography* [1974] (New York: De Capo, 2001), 209. Whistler, on the other hand, pulled painting away from the perceptual world and turned it inward to the elements of painting itself.

<sup>31</sup> See, in particular, Matisse's *The Red Studio* (1911) and *The Dessert: Harmony in Red* (also known as *The Red Room*) (1908) and Kandinsky's *Compositions* in the early 1910s, his work for *The Blue Rider* (1911), and his book, *On the Spiritual in Art* (1911).

<sup>32</sup> In *Cradle of Liberty: Race, the Child, and National Belonging from Thomas Jefferson to W. E. B. Du Bois* (Durham, NC: Duke Univ. Press, 2006), Caroline Levander provides the most thorough-going explication of this link between children and racially marked others. She argues that a racialized notion of national belonging is naturalized in the child, which in turn is used to “represent, naturalize, and, at times, attempt to reconfigure the ground rules of U. S. national belonging” (4-5). Though she goes quite far in proving the links between child psychology and anthropology in the late nineteenth century—which ran throughout nearly all of the social scientific discourse of that era and can be seen in titles like Baldwin's *The Mental Development of the Child and the Race*—she generally emphasizes those writers who would disparage the “primitive” people or who sought simply to educate and train the child out of its undeveloped state. As such, her analysis does little to illuminate the many artists and writers who celebrated the vision of children and “primitives” as a corrective to the stultified, conventional perceptions of western adults.

The discursive entwining of children and non-Western peoples occurs as early as the Romantics—Goethe remarked that “[m]en in a state of nature, uncivilized nations, and children have a great fondness for colours in their utmost brightness”—and it achieves a brief scientific credibility in the form of “recapitulation” theory, the belief that ontogeny, or individual development, recapitulates phylogeny, or the evolution of “mankind” from a “savage” state to the high-point of Western culture. Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Theory of Colours*, trans. Charles Lock Eastlake (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1970), 326. For more on recapitulation and its impact on American literature, see Bill Brown, *The Material Unconscious: American Amusement, Stephen Crane, and the Economies of Play* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1996), chapter four. For a general overview of the history of recapitulation theory, see Stephen Jay Gould's *Ontogeny and Phylogeny* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard Univ. Press, 1977).

By becoming an “impressionist for babies,” Denslow set the style for the post-impressionism of adults.

But of course, not all of *Oz*’s readers were babies, and even those who first jumped at the book’s bright colors as infants eventually grew into toddlers and young children who delighted in the *written* account of Dorothy and her extraordinary friends.

Like Denslow’s illustrations, Baum’s story both references and relies upon the image of the child fostered by late-nineteenth-century psychology. The “Introduction” casts *Oz* as an appeal to the “wholesome and instinctive love for stories fantastic, marvelous, and manifestly unreal” found in “every healthy youngster,” and the opening pages extend this characterization of “healthy” children to the pursuits of play and the enjoyment of color.<sup>33</sup> Before the cyclone whisks her away to Oz, Dorothy lives with her aunt and uncle amid “the great gray prairie” of

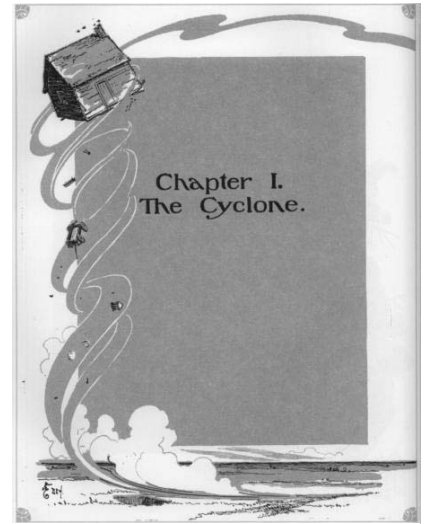


Figure 8 (AWO 10)

Kansas, where “[t]he sun had baked the plowed land into a gray mass.” Everything in this first chapter is gray: the house, previously painted, has been “blistered” by the sun to be “as dull and gray as everything else”; the grass “was not green” but rather “the same gray color to be seen everywhere”; and even Aunt Em, who had arrived in Kansas a “young, pretty wife,” had been changed by the sun and wind: “[t]hey had taken the sparkle from her eyes and left them a sober gray; they had taken the red from her cheeks and lips, and they were gray also” (12). Add the figure of Uncle Henry, who was gray

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<sup>33</sup> L. Frank Baum, *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*; with pictures by W. W. Denslow (New York: Harper Trophy, 1987), 5. Subsequent citations refer to this edition and will appear parenthetically. This edition is a page-for-page reprint of the original *Oz* (Chicago: George M. Hill, 1900), save for the colors.



“from his long beard to his rough boots,” and it seems that the entire scene includes only the dusty tone with which Denslow decorates these first few pages. (*Figure 8*) But then there’s Dorothy and her little dog. “Toto [. . .] made Dorothy laugh,” Baum writes, “and saved her from growing as gray as her other surroundings.” Not that he was colorful—he was actually “a little black dog”—but he “played all day long, and Dorothy played with him” (15). Baum contrasts the laborious toil of the adults with the spontaneous play of the child and her pet, and he locates in the latter an insistent colorfulness, a resistance to the dreary gray of Kansas that the subsequent chapters develop in their bright and glowing colors.

From the time Dorothy opens the door onto the land of the Munchkins (and Denslow switches his ink from gray to blue), the narration never ceases to remark on the wide-eyed wonder with which the little girl meets the land of Oz. Her “eyes grow[] bigger and bigger” as she surveys her surroundings, and she “look[s] eagerly” at the “lovely patches of green sward,” the “[b]anks of gorgeous flowers,” and the “birds with rare and brilliant plumage”—all the items that steal the attention of child-subjects in developmental psychology (22). When among the poppies, the color gets to her even before the “spicy scent”: the “bright red flowers” were “so brilliant in color they almost dazzled Dorothy’s eyes” (111). Later, as they enter the Emerald City, “Dorothy and her friends were at first dazzled by [its] brilliancy”; “even the painted eyes of the Scarecrow were dazzled” by the sparkling emeralds that lined the city’s gate (143, 137). In Oz, all colors are bright and every gaze is bedazzled. The narrative intensifies the hues to a child-like pitch and highlights the absorbed responses of the characters to dramatize the chromatic experience of children so effectively rendered in Denslow’s illustrations. As if

to justify these vibrant hues, Baum sets his wonder tale in a “primitive” place: “the Land of Oz has never been civilized,” the good Witch of the North tells Dorothy (28).

The narrative attention to the Scarecrow’s color-struck vision at the gates of Oz constitutes one of the many ways in which Baum situates his stuffed man firmly within the imaginative horizon established by child psychology. His recent “birth”—a mere two days prior to the start of the story—marks him as a baby, and the Wizard says as much when the Scarecrow petitions him for brains. ““You don’t need them,”” he explains; ““You are learning something every day. A baby has brains, but it doesn’t know much. Experience is the only thing that brings knowledge, and the longer you are on earth the more experience you are sure to get”” (223). In fact, the Scarecrow makes a similar point when relating his dull day upon a pole to Dorothy; “It was a lonely life to lead,” he explains, “for I had nothing to think of, having been made such a little while before” (56). Inconsistency aside (what else could you expect from a man with no brain?), these assessments, paired with the “great deal of curiosity” with which the Scarecrow takes his “first glimpse of the world,” mark the stuffed man as a walking, talking infant, not unlike Bowles’s baby-critic (79). Through the Scarecrow, Baum rehearses the key tenet of developmental psychology: that the mind *grows*, that cognition is a process rather than an effect of some static stuff. Like a child, the stuffed man is slowly accumulating knowledge through his engagement with the sensory world. And like the subjects of Baldwin’s color studies, he sees before he speaks. Once the Munchin farmer paints his eyes, the Scarecrow immediately sees, but even after he gains a mouth, he hesitates to talk: “I did not speak,” he tells Dorothy, “because at that time I didn’t know what a mouth was for” (56).

The Scarecrow's distinction between perceptual experience and linguistic ability recalls the analogous distinctions made in the course of psychological investigations of the developing color-sense and figures the various modes of engagement *Oz* elicits from its young readers. As demonstrated by Darwin's aforementioned fears, psychologists, pedagogues, and parents alike wanted the child's *experience* of color to grow into *knowledge*, and this maneuver required tracking the "pure" mode of color perception into its encounter with language. *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*—which served as a picture book for the infant, a story book for the toddler, and an absorbing tale for the young reader—accompanied the child through this transition, aiding the learning process through the intimate relation of image and text.<sup>34</sup> The interlocking uses of color in both the illustrations and the narrative not only stage the movement from red, blue, and green to "red," "blue," and "green" but also constitute a meditation both on the relation between text and image and on the way this relation enters into the training and education of young—or at least youthful—minds. The psychology of *Oz* thus leads us to its pedagogy.

### **Milton Bradley's Classroom**

In an aside during an essay on Brecht and the advent of radio-plays, Walter Benjamin yokes the "theater of education" with a theater "of entertainment" within the context of mass culture. "Both functions," he writes, "however opposed to each other they seem, are merely complementary phenomena in the realm of a saturated stratum

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<sup>34</sup> Young children learning to read often "practice" by flipping through the pages of a book and making up a story that suits the picture or rehearsing the tale from memory.

which turns everything it touches into stimuli.”<sup>35</sup> Benjamin’s assessment references a world rendered as a chaotic rush of sensations sorted out and given meaning by an embodied observer. By these lights, education resembles mass culture because each attempts to train the individual to synthesize sensory stimuli in particular ways; they share a set of procedures, even if they differ in their goals. Likewise, the modes of attention they foster—focused concentration and absorbed distraction—present two sides of the same psychologized coin, as Jonathan Crary shows at length in *Suspensions of Perception* (1999).<sup>36</sup> As much as any other technology, children’s books straddle this divide, packing a moral or intellectual pedagogy into an entertaining form. Yet as the nineteenth century neared its close, the accent shifted from the educational program to the pleasurable experience, and thus Baum could write, in the “Introduction” to *Oz*, that because “[m]odern education includes morality [. . .] the modern child seeks only entertainment in its wonder tales” (5). Such sentiments, however, do not indicate a preference for distraction over learning so much as they demonstrate a shift in educational practice towards the training of sense-perception grounded in an insistence on the sensory life of the child. “The native interests of children lie altogether in the sphere of sensation,” William James told teachers in 1899, and the educator should enlist bright, sensible objects that appeal to young students in order to initiate the process of learning.<sup>37</sup> In this context, *Oz*’s vivid colors, its appeals to child-like perceptual modes,

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<sup>35</sup> Benjamin, “Theater and Radio” [1932], *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Mechanical Reproducibility, and Other Writings on Media* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2008), 394.

<sup>36</sup> Benjamin’s aside could easily serve as a one-sentence summation of the key thesis of Crary’s book, especially when one considers that the German word for “education” in this excerpt (*Zerstreuung*) also signifies “distraction” in other sections of the essay. Benjamin, “Theater and Radio,” 396.

<sup>37</sup> William James, *Talks to Teachers on Psychology and to Students on Some of Life’s Ideals* (1899) in *Writings 1878-1899* (New York: Library of America, 1992), 766. In an earlier lecture of the same series, James notes that “[n]ovelty in the way of sensible objects, especially if their sensational quality is bright,

situate it alongside both the educational initiatives of Progressive pedagogues and the advertising strategies Baum and Denslow pursued alongside their work for children. These connected yet disparate fields each seek to excite and to direct the child's view of color, and in the process they bring the types of vision figured through childhood into contact with linguistic and cultural categories of thought.<sup>38</sup> From amid these varied inquiries into the intertwining of language and perception, *Oz* stages the encounter between sensory image and literary text characteristic of turn-of-the-century visual culture and so crucial to the literary modernists of the next generation.

In an 1890 study of color-naming, psychologist Harry K. Wolfe worried that the lack of systematic color instruction in elementary schools would slowly chip away at the conceptual and imaginative capacities of the nation's citizenry. He argues that "[t]he habit of indifference to simple sensations during early life [. . .] tends toward the formation of indefinite ideas on more complex subjects," and that as schools ignore the sensory building blocks of experience, the student's higher-order thinking will inevitably suffer. "If children's conceptions of such simple sensations as color are so unsatisfactory," he asks, "what is to be inferred regarding their mental pictures of more complex objects, as bird or tree; say nothing of abstractions like goodness, or humanity?"<sup>39</sup> Wolfe's concern that young Susie's inability to name a green dot might

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vivid, startling, invariably arrest the attention of the young and hold it until the desire to know more about the object is assuaged" (740).

<sup>38</sup> The child's view of color developed in psychology informed these endeavors but was also itself changed in the process. This section will follow these complex adaptations and tease out the understandings of language, perception, and sensation that emerge from their development.

<sup>39</sup> Harry K. Wolfe, "On the Colour-Vocabulary of Children," *University Studies of the University of Nebraska* 1.3 (July 1890), 226, 227. In 1889, Wolfe taught the first psychology courses offered at the University of Nebraska, and this study of the color-naming capacities and habits of school children constituted one of the inaugural studies he and his undergraduate researchers produced. For more on

prevent her from forming clear ideas about leaves or understanding metaphorical figurations of jealousy emerges from a widely-shared belief, rooted in Froebelian principles, that schools should proceed from the most basic sensations (simple colors and forms) to more intricate modes of perception and thinking. Much of the early emphasis on “sense-training” in the classroom appealed to this building-block notion of development, but in the decade following Wolfe’s essay, as Child Study clarified the features of human growth, psychologists and pedagogues alike redefined the role of sensation in education as the child’s primary mode of interaction with the world rather than as the logical starting point for clear thinking. As the aforementioned recommendations from James suggest, teachers were encouraged to approach children as buzzing little sensory receptors—not only wide-eyed for color but also attracted to sounds, activities, and movements—and to use those “native interests” to lead the student into new perceptual and intellectual encounters.<sup>40</sup>

John Dewey, psychologist-cum-pedagogue and later philosopher, championed this educational approach in *The School and Society* (1900), published the same year as *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*. In general, he argues that education must be grounded in the social life of the child, and this broad concern leads him to complain that all “sense-training”—including color-vision exercises, experiments with primary hues, or other such

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Wolfe, see Ludy T. Benjamin, Jr.’s *Harry Kirke Wolfe: Pioneer in Psychology* (Lincoln, NE: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 1991).

<sup>40</sup> Norman Brosterman, in *Inventing Kindergarten* (New York: H. N. Abrams, 1997), describes the difference between Romantic-era education and the psychologically-informed pedagogy of the progressives as follows: “Where traditional Froebelians defined growth as ‘the unfolding and awakening of the essential nature of the child,’ their progressive counterparts asserted it was more a case of ‘the realization of potential and capacity resulting from interaction with the environment’” (102). Brosterman quotes from Harriet Cuffaro, “A View of Materials as the Texts of the Early Childhood Curriculum,” *Yearbook in Early Childhood Education* 2 (New York: Teachers College Press, 1991), 69. See also Evelyn Weber, *Ideas Influencing Early Childhood Education* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1984).

activities divorced from “real needs and motives”—constitutes nothing more than “a mere gymnastic” that “easily degenerates into acquiring what are hardly more than mere knacks or tricks in observation, or else mere excitement of the sense organs.”<sup>41</sup> He insists that all education begin with a recognition of the child’s impulses, including the attraction to bright hues, but then asks that those impulses be given “expression” through activities that “carr[y] the child on to a higher plane of consciousness and action, instead of merely exciting him and then leaving him where he was before, plus a certain amount of nervous exhaustion and appetite for more excitation in the future” (SS 120). Rote color exercises, Dewey implies, function not unlike the chromatic bells and whistles of consumer display: they seek merely to energize and excite the viewer, and they threaten to leave the child a jaded color-junky, always looking for brighter reds and yellows, never satisfied with the current fix. Rather than indulge the child’s view of color, Dewey sought to direct it, to nurture it into a more meaningful and complex perception of a world rich with social and cultural meanings that enwrap the crude sensory stimuli. After all, he explains, “[t]he bare physical stimulus of light is not the entire reality; the interpretation given to it through social activities and thinking confers upon it its wealth of meaning.”<sup>42</sup>

More so than any educator, the toy manufacturer and board game inventor Milton Bradley championed color-instruction as a means of enhancing students’ perceptual capacities and of thus, so he argued, furthering scientific progress, increasing the

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<sup>41</sup> John Dewey, *The School and Society* [1900] (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1990), 135.

<sup>42</sup> Dewey continues: “It is through imitation, suggestion, direct instruction, and even more indirect unconscious tuition, that the child learns to estimate and treat the bare physical stimuli. It is through the social agencies that he recapitulates in a few short years the progress which it has taken the race slow centuries to work out” (SS 99-100).

enjoyment of the beautiful, and arriving at a systematic account of psychological and aesthetic responses to particular color arrangements. He came to color indirectly. In the late 1860s, after Bradley had achieved fame with *The Checkered Game of Life* (1860), Elizabeth Peabody and other educational reformers convinced him to manufacture Froebel's series of gifts and occupations for the Kindergarten, which until then had only been available as imports from Germany. What began as a simple packaging of the established materials—worsted balls, wooden blocks, parquetry tablets—soon expanded into a diverse line of Kindergarten-inspired items, including “[b]oards gridded with holes for colored pegs, pre-punched cards for sewing, and ‘kindergarten’ coloring books.”<sup>43</sup> Amid the post-bellum proliferation of toys, games, dolls, and other paraphernalia directed at the child's eye and mind, Bradley's educational materials stood out for their focus on color as the most underdeveloped and promising frontier in sense-training for children.<sup>44</sup>

In a series of books on color education published in the 1890s, Bradley cast his new materials not as a degradation of the Kindergarten movement but as its logical next step. Referring to the red, blue, yellow, green, orange, and purple worsted balls that

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<sup>43</sup> Norman Brosterman, *Inventing Kindergarten*, 101. Brosterman casts Bradley as a crass commercializer of Froebel's system and sympathetically quotes Peabody's retrospective criticism of the toy-manufacturer's enterprises: “‘The interest of manufacturers and of merchants of the gifts and materials is a snare,’” Peabody warned; “‘It has already corrupted the simplicity of Froebel in Europe and America, for his idea was to use elementary forms exclusively, and simple materials—as much as possible of these being prepared by the children themselves.’” Qtd. in Brosterman, *Inventing Kindergarten*, 101. Brosterman's disdain for Bradley is palpable, as in his comments on how the expanded inventory of Froebel-related materials seemed to dilute the coherence of the Kindergarten movement: “Bradley and other manufacturers in the United States and Europe started selling ‘kindergarten’ toys of their own creation or ones that had been designed by educators as adjuncts to the twenty or so noted by Froebel. The word *kindergarten* and Froebel's name began to be used to promote ‘educational’ toys like building blocks the way the word *natural* has been used recently to sell everything from mouthwash to frozen food” (101).

<sup>44</sup> For the rapid expansion of child-centered markets in the nineteenth century, see Brown, “Child's Play,” 20-21 and Brosterman, *Inventing Kindergarten*, 101; for the continuation of this trend in the first two decades of the twentieth century, see Leach, *The Land of Desire*, 85. As Brosterman notes, a one-page list of goods and prices sufficed for instructional materials in 1870, but by 1890 “catalogs for kindergarten and related materials had become good-sized paperback books” (101).



constituted the first “gift,” Bradley asserts that “Froebel made no mistake when he included color as a part of the first material used in his system of elementary education”; however, despite this implicit acknowledgement of color’s foundational importance, the Romantic pedagogue failed to pursue the development of the color-sense and focused instead on the more definite category of form.<sup>45</sup> The reasons for this omission were two-fold and related: first, Froebel, writing before the advent of synthetic dyes, did not have access to the range of affordable and brightly-colored materials so widely available in Bradley’s day. Second, there are “no generally accepted standards in color to correspond to the sphere, cube, cylinder, circle, ellipse and triangle in form,” and this lack of a metric, which is also a lack of a *language*, prevented any “corresponding advance” in color education.<sup>46</sup> As a manufacturer familiar with the latest color technologies and keen on the many late-nineteenth-century attempts to create a standardized color nomenclature, Bradley proposed to further Froebel’s project both by producing a line of colorful educational materials and by developing a way of classifying and communicating colors that children could use to sharpen their ability to work with, speak about, and even perceive the hues of nature and industry.

In *Color in the School-Room* (1890), *Color in the Kindergarten* (1893), and *Elementary Color* (1895), Bradley presents and refines his argument that color constitutes a foundational area of early education in which students can enhance their perceptual abilities through an advance in linguistic precision. “Color is one of the first things to

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<sup>45</sup> Milton Bradley, *Color in the Kindergarten: A Manual of the Theory of Color and the Practical Use of Color Material in the Kindergarten* (Springfield, MA: Milton Bradley Col, 1893), 3. Subsequent citations will be cited parenthetically as *CK*.

<sup>46</sup> Milton Bradley, *Elementary Color*. Intro. by Henry Lefavour (Springfield, MA: Milton Bradley Co., 1895), 15. Subsequent citations will be cited parenthetically as *EC*.

attract the attention of the infant,” he writes, “almost as soon as a sound and long before form,” and this postulate of psychology dictates that education too begin with color (*EC* 6).<sup>47</sup> Yet the goal is not simply to stimulate the child’s delight in bright hues but “to train” it, for “his color perceptions need cultivation” and the window of opportunity for this is relatively short (*CS* 16, 13). “Until within a very few years there has been no teaching of color in primary schools,” Bradley laments. Students might play with colors in elementary school, but they were not introduced to the scientific principles of color combinations and values until much later, and “[b]y this time the perceptive faculties which the pupils possessed in early childhood have become measurably blunted” (*CS* 14). Like all those who invoke the “innocent eye,” Bradley recognizes that the intense chromatic experiences of childhood dim with age; yet unlike his artistic counterparts, he asserts that proper *knowledge* of color, far from being the offending agent, is the only thing that prolongs the perceptual facilities of childhood into adult life. He argues that children be allowed “the pleasure that a correct knowledge of color will give them through life and the profit it will afford them,” and he sees the way to these pleasures and profits in the teaching of a more precise color vocabulary (*CK* 4).<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Bradley makes this point in all three of his books. He opens the “Introduction” to *Color in the Kindergarten* by noting that color “is the first thing that attracts the child, winning his eye before he pays any attention to form” (*CK* 3), and in *Color in the School-Room*, he insists that color’s rightful role as “one of the earliest subjects which should be taught in any educational course is evident from the fact that some bright color is the first thing to attract the infant’s eye, winning his notice before he pays any attention to form.” Milton Bradley, *Color in the School-Room: A Manual for Teachers* (Springfield, MA: Milton Bradley Co., 1890), 14. Subsequent citations will appear parenthetically as *CS*.

<sup>48</sup> This seamless move from aesthetic pleasure to commercial success occurs throughout Bradley’s writing. In *Color in the School-Room*, he explains that “[w]e should teach the child color not only for the sake of beauty but also for the sake of business” and that “the harmonious combinations and contrasts of different colors constitute one of our greatest sources of pleasure [. . .], and it is equally evident that in numerous lines of business an understanding of the correct use of color is of great commercial service” (13). Though this easy link between art and commerce may at first seem odd, it resonates with the larger discursive framework of nineteenth-century art education within which Bradley was writing. In both Britain and the United States, art education was promoted for the purposes of improving the quality and design of

Again and again, Bradley criticizes the loose and “contradictory” ways in which “artists, naturalists, manufacturers, tradesmen, milliners and the members of our household” speak about color (CK 27). To clean up this linguistic mess, he offered a “logical basis” for color nomenclature grounded in the six spectral colors of light (which happen to be the six colors of Froebel’s first gift): red, orange, yellow, green, blue, and violet.<sup>49</sup> He dismisses triadic theories of “primary hues” as related only to pigments and not to the luminous colors of the world and recommends that all hues be denominated as ratios of the mixtures of these six basic colors (R, O, Y, G, B, V) along with black (N) and white (W).<sup>50</sup> To illustrate, Bradley translates the “wonderful names” given to the colors of “dress goods sold each season” into his own nomenclature. “Ashes of Roses,” a light tint of violet-red, becomes “R. 8 ¼, V. 2 ¼, W. 151 ½, N. 74”; “Oasis,” a shade of yellowish-green, is written “Y.7, G. 10 ½, W. 8 ½, N. 74”; and “Empire” green appears as “G. 18 ½, B. 11, W. 16 ½, N. 53” (CK 23). These translations leap from the language

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manufactured goods and in many cases (as in Massachusetts, Bradley’s home state) the local government even funded art initiatives in school for precisely these reasons. For the history of art education, see Arthur D. Efland, *A History of Art Education: Intellectual and Social Currents in Teaching the Visual Arts* (New York: Teachers College, 1990).

<sup>49</sup> Note the absence of indigo. Though this seventh prismatic color continues to be included in elementary education through the mnemonic devise of R.O.Y. G. B.I.V., its existence as a separate hue easily distinguishable from blue and violet was disputed by late-nineteenth-century physicists and dismissed by Bradley. Art historian John Gage notes that Newton’s initial introduction of indigo into the rainbow followed largely from his desire to find an analogue between the seven distinct notes of an octave and the number of colors in the prismatic spectrum. See Gage’s *Color and Culture* (London: Thames and Hudson, Ltd., 1999), 139-43.

<sup>50</sup> This rejection of the primacy of pigments and of the doctrine that claims to derive all the colors of the world through red, blue, and yellow put Bradley at odds with almost all art educators of his day. In each of his books, he is at pains to explain the unscientific nature of the triadic approach and to offer up his system of color instruction as a necessary wedding of science and art in education. See CK 54, CS 4, EC 10-12.

In fact, Bradley argued that his scientific nomenclature would provide a way of forging a scientific aesthetic, much like the one theorized by Grant Allen and, to a lesser extent, Eugène Véron. Once color and its effects had been rendered communicable, “the feeling for color which every true artist has, may be to a certain extent analyzed so that it can be understood by the scientists and recorded for the benefit of fellow artists one hundred or a thousand miles away and in time an aggregation of facts regarding the psychological effects of color collected which will form the beginning of a valuable fund of color knowledge to be increased from age to age” (EC 12).

of marketing, with its alluring titles, to the language of manufacturing, which requires mathematical precision to communicate specific shades and tints across the distances that separate merchants and distributors. Bradley boasts that his own company has already benefited from “telephoning colors” from the office to the mill (CK 18). In the classroom, students adopt this color nomenclature to identify the hues of natural objects; they combine colorful discs—designed and produced by the Milton Bradley Co.—on a Maxwell Color Wheel, which spins the proportioned colors so that they appear mixed to the eye. Bradley contends that such color instruction, grounded in the adoption of a standardized color vocabulary, would “lead the pupil to closer observation, to see color where he has never thought of looking for it, to discover harmonies where he never knew before they could be found” (CK 32). By this logic, a new way of speaking about colors ushers new color perceptions into experience, and indeed language provides the necessary scaffolding for the appearance of any meaningful object of vision.

But what sorts of color perceptions does such a nomenclature provoke? When the child begins to “see color where he has never thought of looking for it,” or when this new knowledge about nuanced tones prompts discoveries of novel color relations, what exactly are these emergent visual properties? In an anecdote in *Color in the Kindergarten*, Bradley demonstrates that his color nomenclature replaces a world of things with a world of detachable, interchangeable qualities defined through a relational system abstracted from any social environment. To illustrate his hope that “the days of ‘baby talk’” about colors were on the verge of passing away, he tells the story of “[a] little child who had become somewhat familiar with the color wheel” and asked her teacher the color of a dress “of the so-called ‘mahogany color.’” The teacher returns the

question to the child, who replies that she thinks it “‘a shade of red orange’” (CK 39-40). Bradley delights in this precise denomination, which in effect empties color of its real-world referents (“mahogany”) and configures it within a color chart that references only itself. The graduates of Bradley’s color course learn to see the hues of the world apart from their embeddedness within a culture and to treat them as abstract elements that can be combined and arranged to produce both artistic effects and commercial goods: we teach kids colors “for the sake of beauty but also for the sake of business” (CS 13). It is in this regard that “the graduate from a two year’s [sic] course in the kindergarten may have a better color sense than is at present enjoyed by the average business or professional man”; the young pupil has learned to perceive the chromatic world as the stuff of commerce, able to be harnessed and configured through modern technology (EC 6). Bradley’s students emerge from class ready to participate in that “saturated stratum” which Benjamin and Crary see as rendering the perceptual field a hive of stimuli available for all manner of synthesis.

For Bradley, the child who sees dark-orange-red has displayed the knowledge about color necessary for artistic and scientific progress; she has demonstrated a modern mode of vision that separates her from those non-modern masses unable to speak about colors with precision or to perform the industrial feats such skills make possible. In the introduction to *Elementary Color*, the physicist Henry Lafavour lists a variety of fields that deal with colors—psychology, chemistry, physiology, physics, art, and business—and then he echoes Bradley’s contention that “there must be a well developed and carefully trained color sense at the basis of an education which is to lead to the consideration of these and similar chromatic problems.” Of even greater value, he goes

on to say, would be “[t]he effect of such a training on the higher development of our people” (*EC* 2). Bradley too collapses scientific progress with the forward-march of Western nations and treats the ability to speak about colors as a benchmark of modernity. Unlike Gladstone (or Darwin the concerned father), he avoids mistaking color language as an indicator of the full capacity of an individual’s perceptual abilities and instead insists on the ways in which linguistic training can initiate people into the advanced (read: Western capitalist) visual agility his system promotes. Thus, the great masses of the world “ignorant of the simplest principles” of color—those human objects of the anthropological gaze—“are regarded as color-blind because they are color-ignorant” (*CS* 14).<sup>51</sup> Primitive people simply don’t know enough about color. And yet five years later, Bradley seems to contradict himself: after complaining that “little or no advance in color perception has been made in modern times,” he cites the “semi-civilized nations[,] whose drawings are the least artistic” but nonetheless “greatly surpass us in natural color perceptions,” as a spur to color education. “If color is the one thing in which we are deficient and in which we are making no advance,” he challenges, “is it not necessary that we adopt a new line of operations for our color instruction?” (*EC* 6). In one case, the “semi-civilized” are those unable to speak clearly about colors; in the other, they are those with a natural proclivity for color perceptions that exceeds that of the modernized nations. Yet this apparent contradiction reveals a tension fundamental to the consumer culture of the turn of the century. In short, the fantastical worlds of advertising and

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<sup>51</sup> In all of his books, Bradley listed the misdiagnosis of color-blindness as a problem easily eliminated by his color pedagogy. Once trained in his methods, “every teacher would be able to determine definitely is a child under her care has normal color perception and if not, whether the defect is due to genuine color blindness or to a lack of knowledge how to recognize or analyze colors and to give them their correct names” (*CK* 59).

window displays, which enlisted the brightest and most saturated colors to appeal to a “primitive” or child-like eye, required the schematizing, knowledge-heavy color nomenclature advocated in Bradley’s books and articles. Modern culture mustered its most cutting-edge technology to activate a way of seeing associated with non-modern peoples, which included the “modern child.”

Both conceptually and materially, then, Bradley realizes his goal of locating education at the intersection of science and art, commerce and aesthetics. His method of color instruction teases out the intense attunement to color displayed by young children, presses it into a nomenclature based on abstract color-units, and rationalizes the psychological effects bright hues can produce. Just as his translation of “Empire” green into “G. 18 ½, B. 11, W. 16 ½, N. 53” shifted us from the proscenium of consumer capitalism to its backstage, his wider pedagogy fosters an ability to approach colors as sensory stimuli discrete from objects and available for inclusion within a commodity in order to amplify its visual appeal. In addition to encouraging a perceptual mode rooted in science and aimed at art, Bradley created a material link between the toy manufacturer, the educator, and the psychologist through his patented packs of colored construction paper, which he sold in the standard spectral colors as well as in a variety of tints and shades. These papers achieved their colors by combining the chemical advances in synthetic dyes with industrial processes of paper production, and they secured a home not only in the Kindergarten classroom but also in the psychology lab. Bradley never failed to mention his papers as the logical accompaniment to his color nomenclature, even when writing for the journal *Science*, and the success of these papers, however temporary, can be seen in their use in psychological color studies and empirical research on color

perceptions in school-children in the early decades of the twentieth century.<sup>52</sup> Bradley's brand of sense-training thus captures the cultural thickness of turn-of-the-century color education: it both borrowed from and contributed to psychological research; it relied on the products of industry for instruction materials even as it aimed to create a more creative and perceptive industrial workforce; and it invoked Romantic notions of art and childhood but filtered them through late-nineteenth-century scientific principles. It sought to replace the student's immediate and inarticulate sensory response to color with knowledge of hues, values, and chromatic combinations that integrate the child into the complex social networks that constitute the adult world. At its best, such training prepared students to participate critically in a modern democracy and to enrich their sensory lives through the conscious arrangement of cultural environments (this is the hope of Dewey's pedagogy). Yet these objectives were inevitably articulated through the conceptual networks of the turn-of-the-century, which directed the conscious control of stimuli into the production of commercial spectacles and cast the production of model citizens in terms of the economic and racist imperatives of the modern U.S. In education, then, we recognize something of the entertainment world emerging in the urban centers of New York and Chicago in the 1880s and '90s, just as those commercial spectacles reveal a set of pedagogical techniques and imperatives.

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<sup>52</sup> Milton Bradley, "The Color Question Again," *Science* XIX.477 (25 March 1892): 175-76. Bradley's theories were debated in the pages of both this journal and *Nature*. For instance, J. H. Pillsbury's "A Scheme of Colour Standards" (*Nature* 52.1347 [22 August 1895]: 390-92) praises Bradley's nomenclature and provides a series of transcriptions of vague colors into exact descriptions. In the next issue, Herbert Spencer replied to the article, and a couple of months later, the chromolithographer Louis Prang chimed in. See Herbert Spencer, "The Nomenclature of Colours," *Nature* 52.1348 (29 August 1895): 413, and Louis Prang, "The Nomenclature of Colours," *Nature* 53.1360 (21 November 1895): 55-56.



While Bradley campaigned for the importance of training children's color-sense through the adoption of an exact system of color nomenclature, advertisers and marketers sought to activate the child-like susceptibility to bright color present in all adults. And like educators, they sought to direct this response by attaching it to linguistic formulations that situated the sensory influence of color within a broader cognitive network. In short, they used vivid hues to stir up affective energy that they then enlisted to arouse consumer desires and stimulate purchasing habits. Walter Benjamin again provides an insightful account of how this commercial context interfaced with education, this time in a 1929 radio broadcast on "Children's Literature." Speaking of perception-training, he explains that "[t]he extraordinary contemporary relevance of a visually based method of instruction stems from the fact that a new, standardized, and nonverbal sign system is now emerging in the most varied walks of life." Advertising, public signage, newspapers, and statistics all shifted the burden of communication to images rather than text, and thus Benjamin argued that within modernity "an educational problem coincides with a comprehensive cultural one, which could be summed up in the slogan: Up with the sign and down with the word!"<sup>53</sup> As image-based media proliferated in visual culture, cities themselves began to resemble children's books, and the blend of image in text in works like *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* provided a sort of initiation into the types of reading required of the twentieth-century urbanite.<sup>54</sup> Though Baum claimed *Oz* for

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<sup>53</sup> Walter Benjamin, "Children's Literature" (1929) in *Selected Writings: Volume Two, Part One, 1927-1930*, eds. Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland, and Gary Smith (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard Univ. Press, 1996), 251. Benjamin even imagined the possibility of "picture books that introduce children to the new sign language of transport or even statistics" (251).

<sup>54</sup> In "One-Way Street," Benjamin describes the spectacle of commodities he observes in the streets of Riga, Latvia as "look[ing] like a page from an outmoded child's painting-book." Qtd. in Ester Leslie, *Walter Benjamin* (London, Reaktion Books, 2007), 69.

“entertainment,” its presentation of the visual styles of modern commercial culture provided its readers with a thoroughly modern education.

English writer G. K. Chesterton makes an observation similar to Benjamin’s, though where the latter emphasizes the overlap with education, Chesterton draws a parallel between the spectacle of the modern city and the aesthetic delight in color figured through the infant’s innocent eye. In “A Meditation on Broadway,” written after a visit to New York City in 1922, Chesterton defends the modern city against those who would condemn its “skyscrapers and sky-signs” as sacrificing beauty to utility. “As a matter of art for arts sake,” he suggests, “they seem to me rather artistic,” and as proof he invokes the child’s view of colors: “If a child saw these coloured lights, he would dance with as much delight as at any other coloured toys; and it is the duty of every poet, and even of every critic, to dance in respectful imitation of the child” (qtd. in *LD* 346).<sup>55</sup> This passage suggests that both art and the aesthetic aspirations of advertising and “sky-signs” appealed to a child-like absorption in color as a way of quickening attention and inciting emotional responses in viewers. Literary critic Gillian Brown traces the emergence of this connection from its origins in Romantic pedagogy and nineteenth-century sentimental fiction through its naturalization by psychology and emergence on the grand stages of consumerism in the 1890s. In “Child’s Play” (1999), she argues that children’s absorbed play offered nineteenth-century Americans “a tableau of how absorption works,” one useful “for attaching persons to different objects and interests.”<sup>56</sup> Placed

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<sup>55</sup> From G. K. Chesterton, “A Meditation on Broadway,” *What I Saw in America* [1922] (New York: Anthem, 2009), 34.

<sup>56</sup> Gillian Brown, “Child’s Play” in *The American Child: A Cultural Studies Reader*, eds. Caroline Levander and Carol J. Singley (New Brunswick: Rutgers Univ. Press, 2003), 20. Brown’s essay originally appeared in *differences* 11.3 (1999): 76-106.

within this trajectory, Baum and Denslow's *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* constitutes the return of these commercial techniques to their roots in the child's immersion in bright colors. The book offers a meditation on the wiles of consumer capitalism, as both Stuart Culver and William Leach have argued, and in so doing it engages the clash between image and text that characterized turn-of-the-century visual culture and prompted modernist experiments with the optical elements of the page.

Before *Oz*, both Baum and Denslow had distinguished careers in commercial color, and each brought his experiences to bear on the visual and narrative content of the book. Baum, for instance, edited *The Show Window*, a professional journal that offered practical advice to merchants and window-trimmers on how to increase the appeal of their goods through aesthetic display. The journal not only included articles on the psychological impact of particular color combinations but also incorporated such color effects into its own pages: as Leach explains, the journal "was bedecked in colors—rose, pink, yellow, green, tan, blue, and brown" (*LD* 60).<sup>57</sup> In 1900, Baum collected the best bits from *The Show Window*, added up-to-date examples, and published them as *The Art of Decorating Dry Goods Windows and Interiors* only months before the appearance of *Oz*. Among other advice on the use of manikins and paper-mâché props, the manual includes a practical guide for how to produce attractive color effects, complete with a diagram of possible combinations for those without "an eye for color."<sup>58</sup> "Color

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<sup>57</sup> These experiments in the use of colored paper would later reappear in the *Oz* series: *The Road to Oz* (1909) was printed on a variety of differently-hued paper: off-white, light purple, bluish-gray, light green, orange, brown, and emerald green. In the September and October 1898 issues of *The Show Window*, Baum published William M. Couran's article on "The Scientific Arrangement of Color" (*AWO* 61).

<sup>58</sup> L. Frank Baum, *The Art of Decorating Dry Goods Windows and Interiors: A Complete Manual of Window Trimming, Designed as an Educator in All the Details of the Art, According to the Best Accepted Methods, and Treating Fully Every Important Subject* (Chicago: The Show Window Publishing Co., 1900), 23. Subsequent citations appear parenthetically as *AD*.

combinations are governed by set laws,” Baum explains, and by arranging them intelligently, window-trimmers can capture the coveted attention of passers-by (*AD* 24). For this reason, Baum recommends the “bright and varied colorings” of cheesecloth for the backgrounds of displays: easily harmonized and arranged, these hues

make[] a window attractive enough to stop pedestrians, who, glancing at the display, unconsciously note that the goods on exhibition are thrown prominently into the foreground, while the coloring that made them pause has modestly retired and serves only as a foil for the articles of merchandise. (*AD* 27)

Though undetected, colors perform the most essential work of advertising and marketing in the emerging consumer culture: that of “arrest[ing] the eye of the passive throng and so direct[ing] attention to the goods themselves.” Even items “desirable in themselves,” Baum explains, still “need a color effect to throw them out properly”; for as one of the merchant John Wanamaker’s decorators once quipped, “[p]eople do not buy the thing, they buy the effect” (*AD* 35; qtd. in *LD* 83).<sup>59</sup>

Baum’s characterization of color as a force that works beneath the level of consciousness and yet that requires “positive knowledge” on the part of the decorator (through color charts, information about hue values and combinations, and so on) situates him within the same network of seemingly contradictory imperatives that marked Bradley’s educational program. In order to foster an immediate sensory response, a window-trimmer must rely on a host of “set laws” that concern color in the abstract rather than on any particular object. This *knowledge* then enables the production of an *un-knowing* encounter with color, something akin to the child’s encounter with bright hues

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<sup>59</sup> The decorator’s comment is taken from a 1904 essay titled “The Power of Store Decoration.” Baum’s advice is echoed by adman Artemas Ward, who in 1913 called color “the priceless ingredient” of advertisements, the quality that “*creates desire for the goods displayed*” (qtd. in *LD* 45, emphasis in original).

as described by psychologists. By this point, however, color research outside of Child Study, especially that conducted in Jonas Cohn's lab, had revealed "a surprising love of contrasts of highly saturated colors" in *all* adults, a child-eye latent in the adult brain.<sup>60</sup> Baum, who never lost his youthful enthusiasm for the theater and its spectacles, treated color as one of the many modern technologies able to wield a sort of secular magic, something that emerged from rational study and ended in child-like wonder.<sup>61</sup> As critics have often noted, there is much of Baum in the humbug Wizard of Oz.

A color-conscious author such as Baum could have hoped for no better illustrator than W. W. Denslow. By the time Baum met him at the Chicago Press Club in 1898, Denslow had already developed a distinctive and widely praised style based on bold outlines and bright, flat colors. His work experience encompassed many of the key media and forms in the development of color printing—chromolithography in the late 1870s, trade cards and theater posters in the 1880s, advertisements of all sorts, and art posters in the 1890s—and through these jobs he arrived at both an appreciation of the impact of bold hues and an understanding of how best to elicit them through the

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<sup>60</sup> Gage, *Color and Culture*, 192. In his *Autobiography*, Frank Lloyd Wright recognizes this potential for child-like openness even in maturity: "human beings," he writes, "are really childlike in the best sense when appealed to by simple forms and pure, bright color." Qtd. in John Gage, *Color in Art*, 64.

<sup>61</sup> As a young man, Baum pursued careers as a playwright and actor, and even took his one successful show, *The Maid of Arran* (1882) on a brief tour. These ambitions gave way to more reliable work when Baum's wife Maud became pregnant, and the family moved to Aberdeen, South Dakota where Baum worked as a newspaper man and later opened a shop called Baum's Bazaar. It was as the owner of the Bazaar that Baum first became interested in display techniques, and he wrote about successful arrangements in the local papers. For accounts of this period of Baum's life, see Hearn (*AWO* xviii-xxiv) and Katharine M. Rogers, *L. Frank Baum, Creator of Oz* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2002), 1-44.

Also, Baum was fascinated by all the marvels of modern science and technology, especially electricity. In 1901, he published *The Master-Key: An Electrical Fairy Tale*, a book that might be considered to use electricity in the way that *Oz* uses color: that is, it builds a fantastical world around its mysterious ability to give motion to static objects (to "throw them out"). More generally, Baum wrote that the modern child "is surrounded by wonders from the very date of his birth. He is probably rocked to sleep by an electric cradle rocker, and when he gets a little older, he is taken out for a spin in his father's automobile. And then there are the telephone, the wireless and the aeroplane for him to get acquainted with" (qtd. in *AWO* 14).

production processes of the day (*AWO* xxix; *WWD* 10-15, 45, 72). At times, his awareness of the limitations of print manifested itself in outbursts of artistic pride, as when he lamented that his newspaper work had to suffer “the intervention of such factors as bad printing, worse paper and the destroying angel, the photo-engraver,” whose routing machine makes “[e]yes, buttons, and fingers vanish before it” (qtd. in *WWD* 35). But in his attempts to armor his images against the threat of the printer, Denslow distanced himself from the busy cross-hatching and shading that defined the work of his peers and adopted a simplified style, full of strong lines and sharp contrasts. As his biographers note, this approach allowed his drawings to “print clearly and immediately catch the eye,” and it even reconciled him with the destroying angel: according to one San Francisco reporter, Denslow’s “clean, sharp lines [were] the delight of the zincographer” (qtd. in *WWD* 28). More so than most artists and illustrators, Denslow recognized his work as involving industrial processes of reproduction, and his individual style foregrounds this awareness of the technologies of print. His images, in *Oz* and elsewhere, index an entire network of mass media.

Denslow carried this strict attentiveness to the techniques of print into his art poster work, where he added bright, decorative colors to the stark contrasts and sharp lines developed in his newspaper illustrations. Like other artists working in and around Art Nouveau, he embraced flat, saturated hues and arranged them more for decorative effect than for the sake of naturalistic representation. He “worked closely with the printer to choose and place the colors” in his posters, and this meticulousness was not lost on his critics: in his aforementioned profile, J. M. Bowles attributes Denslow’s aesthetic achievements to “a wide knowledge of reproductive color processes, and a strict watch of

the mechanical work on his books, especially for purity of color used” (“CDC” 382; *WWD* 64). In *Oz*, Denslow arranges these pure colors to appeal to the “baby mind,” both to entertain and to exercise infantine sight. In his ad work, he uses these same colors to excite the child-eye in his adult viewers, and Bowles invokes this connection when he notes that advertisers as well as illustrators understand the appeal of bright hues: “in the designer’s room of a certain large manufacturer of cards and posters,” Bowles reports, “the color red has been nicknamed ‘the secret’” (“CDC” 380). *Oz* employs this secret—alongside the correspondingly clandestine tools of blue, green, and yellow—to great effect, adapting psychological accounts of child-like color perception to the material processes of color reproduction in much the way that advertisers, billboard designers, and poster decorators created brightly-hued images that mix saturated tones and suggestive language to train perception.

Thus, though *Oz* has long been celebrated for incorporating elements of modern American life into its fairy tale world, studies that focus exclusively on the characters, events, and details of Baum’s narrative and ignore the book’s embeddedness within turn-of-the-century visual culture do not go far enough.<sup>62</sup> Even the readings that emphasize *Oz*’s relation to consumer capitalism and marketing culture often overlook the extent to which the interplay between image and text staged in the book gathers the techniques and technologies of visual culture into its own aesthetic. As such, the foundational interpretations of *Oz* offered by William Leach and Stuart Culver fall short of their potential even as they overstate the purchase of their claims. Through careful expositions

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<sup>62</sup> Such observations fueled the initial essays in *Oz* criticism, including Baum’s own commentaries on his work. See, for instance, Baum’s “Modern Fairy Tales,” Edward Wagenknecht’s “Utopia Americana,” James Thurber’s “The Wizard of Chittenango,” and Russel B. Nye’s “An Appreciation,” all collected in Hearn’s critical edition of Baum’s text. L. Frank Baum, *The Wizard of Oz*, ed. Michael Patrick Hearn (New York: Schocken Books, 1983).

of Baum's professional writing and the broader trends of commercial display, they have demonstrated the integral role that advertising culture plays in Baum's imaginative landscapes; yet in eliding Denslow's contribution, they miss an opportunity to read *Oz* as engaging the color schemes of consumerism not only in its narrative but also in its material form. Moreover, Culver's New Historicism and Leach's paranoid readings of consumerism's triumph each collapse the literary into the economic, making of Baum a mere mouthpiece for the merchants, admen, and marketers of his day. Though such approaches are helpful insofar as they specify a particular constituent of Baum and Denslow's collaboration, they hamper historical inquiry by ignoring the many other aspects of *Oz*, especially the psychological discourses which, as we have seen, not only shape the book's words and images but also reveal consumerism's indebtedness to the absorbed play of the child-eye. In other words, the fact that *Oz* is a *children's* book becomes irrelevant within these economic frameworks—Baum and Denslow's young audiences figure into the analysis only as unsuspecting participants turning the wheels of consumption. In generating such smooth accounts of the distortions wrought by a new crop of economic forces, Leach and Culver (and their critical cohorts) strip the vast majority of the populace of any active role in the production of culture while endowing a privileged few with the ability to shape the minds and actions of the many with cold, calculating precision.<sup>63</sup> Yet *Oz* calls for a nimbler mode of analysis. We must recognize

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<sup>63</sup> Though I have lumped Leach and Culver together, there are important differences between their readings of *Oz*. Their strengths are similar: each reveals Baum's background in window-trimming and traces the techniques and dispositions of consumerism into *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*. Leach calls the book "a product of the rise of a new consumer mentality" and argues that Baum's no-worry world of abundance and his affable conman the Wizard ready readers to accept the mindsets necessary for consumption (LD 259). Culver makes the similar but slightly different claim that Baum uses his fiction to explore the techniques of commercial display, especially the role of manikins: he treats *Oz* "as a unique, perhaps even bizarre, attempt to explain how the manikin functions in the art of advertising by picturing the conditions under which it comes to life." Stuart Culver, "What Manikins Want: *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* and the Art of



Leach's and Culver's contributions to our understandings of the critical and economic networks of which *Oz* is a part, even as we avoid their totalizing tendencies and seek to follow the ways in which Baum and Denslow produced a book that gathered images and ideas from a range of discourses, including the wider context of visual culture at the turn of the century.

Treated as a multimedia work, Baum and Denslow's *Oz* not only includes farmers, Scarecrows, hucksters, hot-air balloons and other aspects of the Midwestern U.S. circa 1900; it also relies on modern print technologies, display techniques, and theories of color perception for its very appearance. While such assessments might pertain to any number of children's books around this time, *Oz* alone reflects on its relation to these material and conceptual networks and incorporates them into its narrative and artistic styles. In short, the book is inseparable from the color technologies through which it was produced. And yet critic after critic has treated Baum's story, and even his colors, apart from the actual blues, greens, reds, and yellows that mingle with the text and override the drawings. As such, certain basic points about the text of *Oz* remain unmade. For instance, Baum divides his imaginary landscape into color-coded regions not to convey any cryptic or allegorical meaning but simply to provide a set of narrative conditions that justify Denslow's monochromatic illustrations. His single-color geographies showcase

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*Decorating Dry Goods Windows," Representations* 21 (winter 1988), 109. Hereafter cited "WMW." For Leach the historian, *Oz* offers evidence of the changing economic and cultural conditions at the turn of the century; for the New Historicist Culver, Baum's professional and imaginative writing express a shared cultural logic. Each presents Baum's children's book as a training ground for young consumers, and yet we might wonder: if, as Culver argues, *Oz* experiments with the conditions of commercial "magic," might this not constitute a means toward a critical appraisal of those conditions (much like the one that Culver himself enjoys)? The question of why the professional writing must always serve as the interpretive key for the literary writing seems to me an open one that is simply taken for granted by these writers. My goal, then, is both to expand the scope of their insights by applying their basic connections to the visual and narrative elements of *Oz* and to temper their totalizing gestures by attending to the ways in which literature draws from its cultural context without being reducible to it.

the color print technology displayed on nearly every page of the book, and in this light, Dorothy's trip to the southern kingdom of the Quadlings after the Wizard's departure—which is generally treated as the anticlimactic result of sloppy writing—offers an occasion to add a red section to the blue, yellow, green, and brown ones that preceded it. Though we often think of illustrations as following the text, *Oz* presents a unique case of an author composing a story with the medium of the illustrations (though not the images themselves) fully in mind.

This perspective on *Oz* also addresses a persistent quibble among Baum's fans about why he expanded the reach of the colors of each region in the first *Oz* sequel, *The Marvelous Land of Oz* (1904). Where in *The Wonderful Wizard* the blues of Munchkinland, for example, are confined to Munchkin-made products such as houses, fences, clothing, and rugs, in *The Marvelous Land* even the hues of the grass and the dirt change according to location. As Tip explains to Pumpkinhead Jack, in the land of the Gillikins, “the grass is purple, the trees are purple, and the houses and fences are purple. [. . .] Even the mud in the roads is purple. But in the Emerald City everything is green that is purple here.”<sup>64</sup> Readers have attributed this expansion of the color scheme to Baum's poor memory of his own imaginary land, but if we consider that the author reflected on the *look* of the first book, and not just the story, when preparing the sequel, the shift comes to reflect Baum's appropriation of Denslow's vision of *Oz*, the monochrome pages of illustrations that embellished the text. Denslow may have initially drawn Baum's story, but the author's text later narrated Denslow's pictures.

When Baum dramatizes the wide-eyed responses of his characters to bright color, then, or when he catalogs the many green sights of the Emerald City, he invokes a

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<sup>64</sup> L. Frank Baum, *The Marvelous Land of Oz* [1904] (New York: Dover, 1997), 16.

psychological understanding of the child's receptiveness to color in order to direct it towards the hues on the page. Where most writers use color terms to prompt their readers to *imagine* the hues of a described scene, Baum enlists his language to press the reader's eye towards an actual encounter with variously colored inks. If Denslow provides the visual stimuli associated with the child's intense experience of color, Baum surrounds

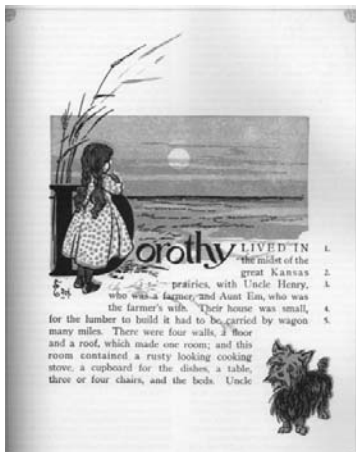


Figure 9 (AWO 11)

these images with language meant to draw attention to the hues, to endow the color work with even greater energy. It's as if he tells the reader, "Look at these colors! Have you ever seen anything like them in a children's book before?" Certainly his enthusiasm for the text's visual appearance—the way it would “glow with bright colors”—influenced his own contributions to *Oz*, and his first chapter seeks to set the book's novelty in relief by figuring the flat,

colorless plains of Kansas as the field of children's literature. As mentioned above, Baum renders all but Dorothy and Toto a dull, lifeless gray in these opening pages. The country is “flat” like paper and its “edge” meets with the sky in “all directions” (12). When Dorothy looks out at this expanse, she sees nothing to hold her attention, and the images of this first chapter picture Dorothy and Uncle Henry staring blankly into the distance. In particular, the opening illustration of the young protagonist positions her as the reader, gazing onto the dull prairie which doubles as the gray page. (Figure 9) The images and the narration combine to foreground the materiality of the book so as to advertise the color work it presents in the subsequent chapters, much as MGM used the sepia shots of Judy Garland among the farmhands as a foil for the vivid color of Oz.

As a collaboration between a writer and an artist, both steeped in the color techniques of commercial culture, *Oz* engages the broader trends of its visual culture by incorporating the entanglement of word and image into its very form. Advertisements, signage, and film, according to Benjamin, had “pitilessly dragged” written language “out into the street,” pulling it from its safe haven in the book and throwing it onto walls and placards.<sup>65</sup> In its new environment, script began to assume new properties, and in *One-Way Street*, Benjamin worries if old-fashioned books could continue to hold their audiences: “before a contemporary finds his way clear to opening a book,” he writes, “his eyes have been exposed to such a blizzard of changing, colorful, conflicting letters that the chances of his penetrating the archaic stillness of the book are slight.”<sup>66</sup> Indeed, some of *Oz*’s reviewers complained that Denslow had “strewn many color effects over the text in a way to tempt a child to ‘skipping’”; that is, they worried that all that eye-candy would prevent children from actually reading.<sup>67</sup> Of course, Baum and Denslow would never have made such a hard distinction between their readers and their viewers; for them, the two functions were thoroughly intertwined in modern culture, and therefore the author and illustrator twisted them together in their “modernized fairy tale” (5). Rather than shy away from the force of the image, they sought to harness the energy of visual displays, and in so doing they demonstrated the extent to which the child’s delight in bright colors had been awakened and mobilized within the wider spheres of advertising and commercial display. Like Benjamin, they recognized that the force of the ad comes

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<sup>65</sup> Walter Benjamin, “Attested Auditor of Books” from *One-Way Street* (1928), in *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Mechanical Reproducibility, and Other Writings on Media*, eds. Michael W. Jennings, Brigid Doherty, and Thomas Y. Levin (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2008), 171.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid*, 172.

<sup>67</sup> “The Book-Buyer’s Guide,” *The Critic* 37.6 (Dec. 1900), 566.

not in “what the moving red neon sign says,” but in “the fiery pool reflecting it in the asphalt”—not in its semantics, but in the glow of its colors.<sup>68</sup>

In addition to forcing us to consider the confrontations between text and image instigated by late-nineteenth-century technology and its commercial uses, *Oz* also offers a meditation on the status of the written word in the shadow of the alluring image. Baum’s prose offers at least two possibilities here: at times, he uses his language to draw attention to Denslow’s colorful drawings; at other times, he dramatizes color effects to explore their status within the aesthetics of advertising. In each case, his prose displays an awareness of color’s sensory impact—its ability to excite a viewer—and attempts either to harness or to analyze this power. First and foremost, Baum’s repetition of the monochromatic hues of the various regions of his imaginary geography direct the reader’s eye to the actual colors on the page; they mingle with the illustrations and seek to intensify the visual experience by training attention onto the bright tones. As in Bradley’s color pedagogy, the words here provide the scaffolding through which the perceptions of the reader-viewers might be focused and prepared to encounter the colorful illustrations in a more conscious and nuanced manner. The color terms seek to amplify the color images both by prompting the reader to notice them and by modeling the sorts of wide-eyed enjoyment such colors sought to achieve. For example, to enhance the effect of Denslow’s blue illustrations in the early chapters of *Oz*—the first instance of the “glowing” hues that so excited the author—Baum narrates Dorothy’s delight in the “dainty blue color” that graces the Munchkin houses, fences, clothing, and rugs (37). Through the combined force of the bright inks and the linguistic framing, *Oz* becomes an

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<sup>68</sup> Walter Benjamin, “These Surfaces for Rent” from *One-Way Street* (1928), in *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Mechanical Reproducibility, and Other Writings on Media*, eds. Michael W. Jennings, Brigid Doherty, and Thomas Y. Levin (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2008), 173-74.

advertisement for its own color effects; it offers its readers the delight taken in an intense experience of vivid hues rendered through the latest print technology, and, in so doing, it stirs the types of color encounters at work both in commercial display and, in more rarified forms, in modernist art.<sup>69</sup>

This foregrounding of color, which runs throughout *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*, finds its most concentrated expression in the chapters set in the Emerald City, where Baum's narrative presents an artificially green cityscape as a model for the production of color effects grounded in abstract knowledge and aimed at vivid sensory experiences. As



**Figure 10 (AWO 160)**

Dorothy and her troupe approach the home of the Wizard, Baum and Denslow heap green upon green: in addition to the usual green houses and fences, the city itself emits a green glow, and its green walls are guarded by a gatekeeper who wears green clothing, stands on a green box, and has greenish skin (131, 137, 138). The glow of the emerald-studded gate “dazzle[s]” the eyes of the onlookers, and the illustrations that accompany these descriptions glisten and sparkle with green gems. (Figure 10) To add to this general

amplification of color, the gatekeeper issues green glasses to all of the characters, explaining that such eyewear is necessary to protect inhabitants from “the brightness and glory” of the city. With these tinted spectacles strapped to their heads, the Wizard-seekers move through the Emerald City in a wash of green, unaware that the vivid color

<sup>69</sup> Stuart Culver reads aspects of Baum's advice in *The Art of Decorating* in a similar vein. Speaking of the screen (announcing, “Watch this window!”) that a window-trimmer might put up while arranging a display, he argues: “The screen advertises the advertiser himself or, more accurately, his ingenuity and wizardly, advertising the power of advertising without promoting any specific line of goods” (“WMW” 107-08).

results from the glasses rather than the objects. They wonder at the “green clothes” and “greenish skins” of the inhabitants, the “window panes [. . .] of green glass,” and the way that “even the sky above the City had a green tint, and the rays of the sun were green” (143, 144). When Dorothy peeks inside the shops, she sees an entire stock of green commodities: “Green candy and green pop-corn were offered for sale, as well as green shoes, green hats and green clothes of all sorts. At one place a man was selling green lemonade, and when the children bought it Dorothy could see that they paid for it with green pennies” (144). Baum continues at this pace each time Dorothy and her friends encounter a new aspect of the Emerald City, and during the two visits to the Wizard the word “green” appears almost one hundred times.<sup>70</sup> Before long, the *greens* attract more attention than the objects themselves, and this repetition, combined with the narrative device of the green glasses, signals the Emerald City as a laboratory for exploring color effects.<sup>71</sup>

In particular, Baum isolates green to experiment with the aesthetic production of sensory and affective states. Such experiments informed the window-display strategies Baum presented in *The Art of Decorating*; yet where the colors of the show window were meant to “modestly retire” after throwing the goods “prominently into the foreground,” the colors of the Emerald City occupy the spotlight and override the goods on which they appear. As Culver explains, the scenes of economic exchange Dorothy glimpses in the

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<sup>70</sup> For comparison, *The Marvelous Land of Oz* has only 48 mentions of “green,” even though much of its action takes place in and around the Emerald City, and the third and fourth books in the series have less than twenty-five apiece.

<sup>71</sup> In such passages, when Baum describes visual phenomenon that would be brightly represented by Denslow’s drawings, the celebrated “plainstyle” of the text’s language strains itself through moments of distracting repetition that foreground the language itself rather than the images the words seek to conjure. Readers come to see “green” rather than green. These deviations in Baum’s style anticipate modernist reflections on the material nature of texts instigated by a mass culture of colorful images in the decades following *Oz*.

Emerald City depict an economy in which the theatrical effects used to stir consumer desire and to endow goods with visual appeal have eclipsed the more traditional emphasis on use value. Speaking of the green spectacles, Culver writes that they “project the supplemental feature, the desirable color, onto the items offered for sale”—they endow the whole of the city “with the magical value of greenness” (102). As such, they function analogously to the plate glass windows of store fronts, which “invest[] commodities with a certain supplemental value that, like greenness, can’t be purchased or consumed” (107). In this topsy-turvy world, the aesthetic tricks of the window-trimmer are staged on a grand scale, detached from any particular object (other than Oz himself), and the usual relation between stable form and fluctuating color is reversed. In the Emerald City, shapes shift and colors remain the same: the Great Oz, so it seems, “can take on any form he wishes,” alternatively appearing as a giant head, a ball of fire, a terrible beast, and a lovely lady to his various petitioners. Not only does Baum bring the “supplementary” and “evanescent” qualities of color into the foreground, as Culver notes, but he does so in such a way as to stabilize them, to treat color as a concrete and material aspect of his aesthetic project.

For Baum, the process of stabilizing color entails its extraction from the shifting world of natural colors and its reconstellation in the production of aesthetic environments. The Wizard’s account of why he implemented the green-spectacle decree specifies this movement from natural to artificial hues: upon his arrival in Oz, he ordered the people to build a city; “Then I thought, as the country was so green and beautiful, I would call it the Emerald City. And to make the name fit better I put green spectacles on all the people, so that everything they saw was green” (221). The green of the Emerald



City—for all its association with the superimposed tints of the glasses—originated in the lush landscape of Oz, and in this way, the emergence of the intensified greens that come to override the hues of nature parallel the rise of modern synthetic dyes that enabled the colorful displays Baum celebrates in his professional writing.<sup>72</sup> Moreover, and particularly important for the multimedia project of *Oz*, the transformation from the green of the countryside to the green of the City occurs through the agency of the color *name*: language provides the hinge between the initial green and its intensified counterpart. The colors of the Emerald City thus encapsulate the techniques at the heart of Baum's aesthetic, both in his literary writing and in his show-window work; they demonstrate the ways in which colors, detached from the forms and content of a story (or ad), act as affect regulators within an aesthetic encounter. In the Land of Oz, Baum created a colorful landscape in which the individual hues bear little relation to nature and every resemblance to the fantasy worlds produced in consumer culture through the agency of synthetic dyes. To create such landscapes, the artist needs “positive knowledge” of color. The production of sensory color effects requires a schematic understanding of the science of color. Considered both in terms of this knowledge that produced them and in the vivid experiences they seek to generate in their consumers, *Oz*'s colors thus capture the Janus-face of modern discourses of perception as characterized by Jonathan Crary: they both seek to attract attention and flirt with its dissolution. They call readers to train their eyes on the page, and yet, once fixed, seek to dazzle, to produce a state of reverie in which the reader can no longer be said to be paying attention as such.

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<sup>72</sup> Baum mentions these aniline dyes by name when describing the process of shellacking an electric bulb in *The Art of Decorating* (113).

## “And I Too Was Coloured into This Landscape”

Baum continued to write Oz stories until his death in 1919, but none of these sequels excited him like his first foray into color printing; his eye, after the first *Oz*, was captured by brighter media. First, he turned to his old flame, the theater, and helped produce the spectacular stage production of *The Wizard of Oz* that ran from 1902 to 1911, garnering as much critical and popular acclaim as the book. But it was the cinema that attracted most of Baum’s enthusiasm (not to mention his money), and Baum made repeated attempts to bring the Land of Oz to film.<sup>73</sup> The first such effort—a combination of hand-tinted film, live actors, and magic lantern slides called *The Fairylogue and Radio-Plays* (1908)—offers the most vivid extension of Baum’s experiments with color media. (Figure 11) Early on in the show, a film sequence dramatizes the transition from print to film in ways that suggest the immersive goals of the original book. Baum describes the scene, which begins with an image of an open book, as follows:

On the first page is disclosed a black and white picture of little Dorothy. . . . I beckon, and she straightaway steps out of its pages, becomes imbued with the colors of life and moves about. The fairies close the book, which opens again and again till the Tin Man, the Scarecrow and all the others step out of the pages of the book and come, colored, to life. (qtd. in *AWO* lxvii-lxviii)

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<sup>73</sup> Even the second Oz book, *The Marvelous Land of Oz* (1904), was largely conceived as promotional material for Baum’s second Oz-themed stage production, *The Woggle-Bug* (1905), and the subsequent sequels served to generate characters and capital for ventures in other media. Baum even tried to cut the series off with *The Emerald City of Oz* (1910), which ends with Glinda casting a magic spell on Oz that renders it invisible and precludes any communication between its inhabitants and Baum, the land’s “royal historian.” Three years later, however, financial difficulties pressured Baum to return to the series, and eight Oz books followed. *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*, then, is unique among Baum’s work both because of the nature of his collaboration with Denslow and because of his attention to—and excitement about—the medium of print.

As in *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*, the transition to color in the film emphasizes the “magic” of the modern technologies on display; but where the book promotes absorbed engagement by mingling its text with bright images, the film achieves a similar effect through the visualization of a text’s interactive qualities.<sup>74</sup>



**Figure 11**

The cinematic sequence imagines the work of the earlier book in terms that anticipate one of Walter Benjamin’s many meditations on the colors of children’s literature. With regards to a Hans Christian Andersen tale of a story whose characters come to life, Benjamin offers a small revision: “Things do not come out to meet the picturing child from the pages of a book,” he explains; “instead, the child enters into them as a cloud that becomes suffused with the riotous colors of the world of pictures.” When the child sinks into a colorful book, “he makes the Taoist vision of perfection come true: he overcomes the illusive barrier of the book’s surface and passes through the colored textures and brightly painted partitions to enter a stage on which the fairy tale lives.”<sup>75</sup> Through color, the reading subject and the read object inseparably fuse, and

<sup>74</sup> The “Radio-Plays” referred not to developments in sound technology but to a process of hand-tinting developed by Michel Radio, whom Baum met while visiting Paris. For a discussion of *The Fairylogue and Radio-Plays*, see Hearn, *AWO* xvi-lxx. In 1910, Selig studios in Chicago, where the film sequences of the *Radio-Plays* had been shot, released four short films based on Baum’s children’s books, and in 1914, Baum, who had relocated to Hollywood, California, established the Oz Film Manufacturing Company, which produced three feature-length Oz films in the subsequent two years. These efforts were all in black and white, and this constraint of the medium may very well account for why these films seem like diversions or false-starts in the evolution of *Oz*, which could only take on a durable cinematic form with the advent of Technicolor. For Baum’s cinematic aspirations, see Hearn, *The Annotated Oz*, lxxi-lxvii.

Benjamin's description invokes a mystical trope to signal the child's view of color as an empirical quality with metaphysical import. His writings on children's books treat the absorbed mode of perception presented in *Oz* as a philosophical concept that grounds materialist inquiry; yet he never turns his critical gaze onto the history of his own metaphor. Nonetheless, Benjamin's characterization of the child's immersive experience with color constitutes an essential development in the career of this cultural image, one that clarifies the conceptual and critical stakes of my analysis of *Oz* and that enables us to track Baum's narrative inventions through their manifestations across a range of media.

Before Benjamin investigated the "phantasmagoria of capitalist culture," he developed a metaphysical framework based on the "colours of phantasy" epitomized by the child's encounter with picture books.<sup>76</sup> As the above "vision of perfection" suggests, Benjamin prized the child's view of color as evidence of the permeability of subject and object, and he explored the "fluid" realm of chromatic experience to critique the Kantian insistence on a priori *forms* of intuition. For Kant, all experience emanates from the universal categories of time and space; without these forms, "experience" cannot happen. Yet the perceptions of children, in which a shifting world of color appears prior to the recognition of form, suggest an alternative empirical theory, one unrestrained by laws that claim to govern experience in all places and through all time. Benjamin elaborates

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<sup>75</sup> Walter Benjamin, "A Glimpse into the World of Children's Books" [1926], in *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility, and Other Writings on Media*, 226.

<sup>76</sup> Walter Benjamin, "Paris, The Capital of the Nineteenth Century" (1935) in *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility, and Other Writings on Media*, 102. Benjamin writes about the "colours of phantasy" in the untranslated fragments titled, "The Rainbow: A Dialogue on Phantasy" and "The Rainbow or the Art of Paradise" from 1914-15; I have quoted from Howard Caygill's translated excerpts in *Walter Benjamin: The Colour of Experience* (London: Routledge, 1988). Caygill's book offers the most thorough-going investigation of the importance of color to Benjamin's intellectual career and critical method, going so far as to claim that the early writings on color present "the new concept of experience and the terminology in which to express it" that undergirded Benjamin's later investigations of script, visual technology, history, and experience (9).

this possibility, insisting that the Kantian categories constitute but one possible configuration of experience and not the fundamental conditions for its appearance. In so doing, he raises Ruskin's image of the child-eye, with its preference for direct perception over conceptual frameworks, to the level of a philosophical concept, and it comes as no surprise that his critique invokes the principles of modern art: "[t]he child's view of color," he writes, "represents the highest artistic development of the sense of sight" ("CVC" 50). Benjamin makes of Kant the habit-heavy man who cannot *see* what he doesn't already *know*, and as an antidote to such blindness he offers the sensory openness of children. Where the adult regards color "as a deceptive cloak for individual objects existing in time and space," the child finds in color "the pure expression of [its] pure receptivity, insofar as it is directed at the world" ("CVC" 51).

For Benjamin, color reveals a shifting world of relations in which the forms of experience—especially that of experiencing subject and experienced object—have not yet emerged and within which they continually dissolve. Though initially defined in terms of children, he extends perceptual access to this primordial realm to adults in "The Rainbow: A Dialogue on Phantasy," wherein Margarethe tells her painter friend George of the brilliant and vivid colors of her dreams. When experiencing these hues of "phantasy," Margarethe loses her sense of self: "I was not the one who saw, but only seeing. And what I saw were not things . . . but only colours. And I too was coloured into this landscape."<sup>77</sup> This self-less vision, an act of pure perception, runs throughout experience as the immanent "plane of configuration" upon which historical eras inscribe their particular forms of perception, shaped by a combination of material technologies and metaphysical dispositions. What children "learn from bright coloring," in this

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<sup>77</sup> Qtd. in Caygill, *Walter Benjamin: The Colour of Experience*, 11.

context, is not the ability to see the world of objects more precisely; rather, the “pedagogical function” of color comes through its ability to engage the imagination and to put viewers into contact with the buzzing world of perceptual possibility not yet congealed into the objects of reflective experience.<sup>78</sup> For adults, these lessons might come in the contemplation of children’s drawings or picture books, but they also might come through hashish or modern art (Benjamin was especially fond of Klee and Kandinsky, both proponents of the child-eye). Benjamin threw himself into each of these realms, and he developed his theory of chromatic experience as the philosophical backdrop for his later work, in which he probes the formal categories of experience presented as natural within particular cultures and searches for the glimmers of different configurations that “flash[] up at the instant when [they] can be recognized and [are] never seen again.”<sup>79</sup>

Although Benjamin’s celebration of the child’s view of color smacks of mysticism, the metaphysical account of experience developed through his meditations on color undergirded and enabled his materialist analyses of nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century modes of perception. What seems like a mere championing of a-formal, non-conceptual, pre-subjective experience does not, in the end, suggest that such states are to be dwelled in permanently, as if that were possible. After all, it is “[p]roductive adults” who see color “only within law-given circumstances” (“CVC” 51, emphasis mine). The child’s view must be recognized and affirmed as the substratum of all experience in order to create the space necessary for grasping the formal structures—both material and

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<sup>78</sup> “Old Forgotten Children’s Books,” 410; “A Child’s View of Color,” 51.

<sup>79</sup> Walter Benjamin, “These on the Philosophy of History,” *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt. Trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 255. For Benjamin and drugs, see his *On Hashish* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard Univ. Press, 2006), which collects writings from 1927 to 1934.

conceptual—that shape historical perception. But Benjamin does not intend politics to address *only* the sensory and affective aspects of experience, even as he insists that these areas be opened to political thought. It is in these terms that we should understand the dynamic tension between “pure perception” and linguistic or cognitive categories that run throughout the history of discourse on “the innocent eye.” The artistic or Ruskinian strand stresses the moment of sensory receptiveness necessary to loosen cultural habits; the pedagogical or Bradleyan approach emphasizes the construction of new categories, which will inevitably be restricting and may turn out to have pernicious effects but which are nonetheless necessary for growth or even consciousness. Benjamin’s goal is not to lose the subject entirely but rather to explore its limits and the historical contingencies that shaped its emergence in order to reconstruct new forms and practices of subjectivity, tailored to the possibilities revealed by the child eye and suitable for community development.<sup>80</sup>

To reach these critical insights and to develop these methodological tools, Benjamin drew on the cultural figure of the child lost in color, but while he used this image to wage his materialist readings of culture, he never turned his historical eye back to that early and important image. As such, he never connected his occasional discussions of the colorful world of commodities with the power he granted to vivid hues. Yet *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*, considered as a node in a complex cultural network that connects psychological research, synthetic dye production, print technology, and Kindergarten pedagogy, reveals the historical components of Benjamin’s favored trope. Tracing the relations between Baum’s commercial work and his fiction—and among all

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<sup>80</sup> As we will see in the following chapter, John Dewey’s later work on aesthetics provides an example of this combination of pedagogical practice and aesthetic sensibility.

of these texts and the images produced by Denslow—offers insights into how the child’s view of color both provided a key figure for the development of commercial display and structured a set of historical and aesthetic concerns about the interplay between image and text. The original *Oz*, therefore, sets the stage for the material analysis of color that Benjamin never conducted.

But just as *Oz* can extend Benjamin’s project, so too can Benjamin illuminate the progression of the *Oz* story from print to screen. In particular, his thoughts on the colors of “phantasy” connect the child’s experience of printed colors with the shifting hues of colored light—the Technicolor glow that MGM brought to its version of Baum’s tale. With color film, the bright colors that entranced Margarethe in her dreams were brought into mass consumer culture, and the cinematic version of *Oz* capitalizes on this new technology in the same way that Baum and Denslow’s book made use of color printing. Indeed, the durability of Baum’s narrative results, in many ways, from its ability to showcase the visual—and in particular *color*—technologies through which it is told: the print of 1900, the Technicolor of the late-1930s, the color broadcasting abilities that prompted NBC to begin its yearly airings of *Oz* in the 1950s, and, most recently, the Blu-Ray format promoted by the movie’s re-release in 2009. Each innovation in color prompts a new adaptation, and though the film version remains the Ur-*Oz* (because moving, speaking images remain our primary mode of persuasion and entertainment) it is easy to imagine a new version accompanying the next major shift in visual technology—perhaps a “virtual” *Oz*. These successive visions of the imaginary landscape first rendered by Baum and Denslow continue to pursue the tension evident in the 1900 book: the apparent paradox between the “positive knowledge” that goes into the production and



use of modern technologies and the absorbed sensory pleasures they seek to produce. More so than any other movie in recent memory, James Cameron's *Avatar* puts this connection on spectacular display, building his Pandora as a new Oz, a new "primitive" land enabled by the bells and whistles of modernity. Not only is the presentation of the bright blue Na'vi made possible by a tremendous outpouring of capital and digital technology, but the narrative depicts these imaginary indigenes through a mix of the visual trappings of "non-modern" societies and a figuration of the grand hopes of technophiles: that we will one day be able to interface our nervous systems with our digital tools so seamlessly, that it will be like the entwining of nerve endings that link the Na'vi to their animals and environment. No wonder, then, that Col. Miles Quaritch, right before the full spectacle of Pandora is to be revealed, tells his troops: "You are *not* in Kansas anymore."<sup>81</sup>

The many avatars of *Oz*, and the visions of child-like perception they enlist, thus foreground a strategy by which the modern tools of technology are used to fashion a new primitivism, a sensory immediateness engineered through careful aesthetic planning. They all take shape within the context of the market, and yet that fact—so conclusive for Leach and Culver—need not lead to the assertion that *all* attempts to direct or stimulate sensation through "positive knowledge" be reducible to capitalism (or, even worse, to fascism). Critics need not restrict their critiques of these strategies to calls for a permanent state of de-coding or of permanent revolution, for, as we have seen, such

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<sup>81</sup> *Avatar*. Screenplay by James Cameron. Dir. James Cameron. Per. Sam Worthington, Zoe Saldana, Sigourney Weaver, Michelle Rodriguez, and Stephen Lang. 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox, 2009. Though it seems like yet another stereotyped presentation of non-western peoples up against the ravaging forces of modernity—and of course, on some level, it is just that—*Avatar* is at its most interesting as a fantasy of how these same aspects of the modern world (especially its virtual technologies) might be used to achieve the sort of immediate communion with our material and social environments that the modern era was supposed to have destroyed.

states—figured through children and color—are firmly within the toolbox of capitalism. Instead, the critical task is to identify these tools and techniques but not to reduce them to the functions they perform within a particular context. In recognizing an affinity between modern art and advertising, for instance, there is no reason to decide that modernism is simply economics in disguise; rather, the challenge is to understand how similar aesthetic practices might have different effects within different contexts. The critic's charge then becomes that of seeking out the possibilities within a particular configuration and working to mobilize them in other contexts, through new textual or conceptual connections. Such a task cannot be accomplished when texts are treated either as isolated discursive objects or as symbols of cultural conditions. Here, the larger lesson of color, especially as it pertains to *Oz* criticism, becomes clear: the first step to understanding the ways in which a text engages and assembles elements of its material and conceptual network is to abandon the reflex of casting its colors—as much as its other components—as mere allegories. Only then might the rich and dynamic connections between a literary text and its cultural contexts—or between language and images—be opened to critical discussion. In the next chapter, we will see how such an approach applies to Nella Larsen and Claude McKay, writers who resist the temptation to make color an allegory for race and instead take up the material colors of 1920s New York to craft modern ways of inhabiting blackness. In so doing, they provide a more critical and nuanced investigation of the modern primitivism on display in *Oz*.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### On Feeling Colorful and Colored in the Harlem Renaissance

Few characters in literary history are as attuned to color as Helga Crane, the fashionable and mixed-race protagonist of Nella Larsen's *Quicksand* (1928). She begins the novel immersed in a vibrant environment of her own construction: a "single reading lamp, dimmed by a great black and red shade," casts its soft glow over a "blue Chinese carpet," a bowl of flowers, an "oriental silk," and Helga herself, dressed in a "vivid green and gold negligee" and sunk in a chair "against whose dark tapestry her sharply cut face, with skin like yellow satin, was distinctly outlined."<sup>1</sup> The narration here displays the careful attention to the colors of fabrics, lights, and skin tones that Helga cultivates throughout the novel and that Larsen early on specifies as a contentious component in early-twentieth-century performances of race. While preparing to leave Naxos, a fictionalized version of the Tuskegee Institute, Helga surveys the "dull attire" of her female coworkers and considers two contrasting manners of inhabiting blackness, parsed according to their relation to color. The first comes through the remembered voice of "the dean of women," a "great 'race' woman" whose speech about proper dress Helga recalls in fragments: "'Bright colors are vulgar'—'Black, gray, brown, and navy blue are the most becoming colors for colored people'—'Dark-complected people shouldn't wear

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<sup>1</sup> Nella Larsen, *Quicksand* [1928] (Mineola, New York: Dover, 2006), 1, 2. Subsequent citations refer to this edition and appear parenthetically as *Q*.

yellow, or green or red” (Q 16). Such is the code that prevails at Naxos. But Helga looks on these “[d]rab colors” with contempt and insists on an alternative, more colorful way of being “black”:

something intuitive, some unanalyzed driving spirit of loyalty to the inherent racial need for gorgeousness told her that bright colors *were* fitting and that dark-complexioned people *should* wear yellow, green and red. Black, brown, and gray were ruinous to them, actually destroyed the luminous tones lurking in their dusky skins. One of the loveliest sights Helga had ever seen had been a sooty black girl decked out in a flaming orange dress, which a horrified matron had next day consigned to the dyer. Why, she wondered, didn’t someone write *A Plea for Color*? (Q 16-17).

Helga’s appeal to an “inherent” and “intuitive” affinity for bright colors rebels against the bleached-white conformity personified by the horrified matron and attempts to revalue a received racial stereotype—the rampant sensuousness of African Americans—into racial asset: a vivid and uninhibited way of living suited to the sensory overload of modern colors, which Helga assembles with such style.

After all, Helga’s plea for color was not the only or even the first such plea to be made in the early decades of the twentieth century. Similar calls for vivid hues appeared in advertising trade journals, art magazines, and the growing number of advice books written by professional psychologists for commercial marketers.<sup>2</sup> Like Helga, these commentators praise color as the lively element of perception, and though they stop short of asserting an “inherent need for racial gorgeousness,” they rarely fail to invoke the exotic or the primitive in characterizing color’s power. In 1917, for instance, Mrs. Arthur T. Aldis delivered a paper titled “Sunshine and the Human Plant: A Plea for Color” to the Sixth National Conference on Housing in Chicago; in it she argues that “[w]e are quickened and excited by the beauty of color,” and she appeals to the motley houses of

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<sup>2</sup> For a survey of these calls for color, see Stephen Eskilson’s “Color and Consumption,” *Design Issues* 18.2 (spring 2002): 17-29. Hereafter abbreviated “CC.”

faraway countries—“Spain or Italy or Bavaria or Hungary”—as a model for enlivening American architecture.<sup>3</sup> “Now I am convinced [. . .],” Aldis continued, “that color—rich, warm, luxuriant color—used judiciously and lavishly, in our building of houses, in inside decoration and outside as well, would have an incalculably cheering and beneficial effect upon our mental horizon.”<sup>4</sup> The sheer delight in color, along with Aldis’s mix of indulgence and restraint, matches the tone of Helga’s perceptual experience and presents a tamer version of the position held by Winold Reiss, a German immigrant whose illustrations of Harlem luminaries and “types” appeared in the first edition of Alain Locke’s *The New Negro* (1925). In an interview with *Art Digest*, also titled “A Plea for Color,” Reiss insists that “[t]he American public [. . .] wants color and demands it.” Though “it was once considered vulgar or even sinful to use too bright a red or blue,” those Puritan days are thankfully over, and we are now “allowed to express our feelings without restraint.” As an illustration of this natural love of color, Reiss points to Native Americans, “the most colorful people in history,” and he thus extends the connection between color and “exotics” assumed by Aldis and on display in Helga’s “oriental silk” and “Chinese carpet.”<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Arthur T. Aldis, Mrs., “Sunshine and the Human Plant: A Plea for Color,” *Housing Problems in America: Proceedings of the Sixth National Conference on Housing* (Chicago: National Conference on Housing, 1917), 332, 333. Mrs. Aldis spoke to the conference as the President of the Visiting Nurses’ Association of Chicago, and her enthusiasm for color follows from the interest in therapeutic interiors discussed in chapter two of this dissertation. As a resident nurse for much of her life, beginning in the mid 1910s, Larsen was certainly privy to these conversations. For Larsen’s training as a nurse, see George Hutchinson, *In Search of Nella Larsen: A Biography of the Color Line* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard Univ. Press, 2006), especially chapter six.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, 334.

<sup>5</sup> “A Plea for Color,” *Art Digest* VIII.10 (15 February 1934), 24. “Color, color, and still more color is the plea of Winold Reiss,” writes the anonymous reporter, and Reiss directs this plea to Americans in particular, since “[w]e are a young nation” (and “[y]outh needs color”) and because the climate in the U.S. “creates a longing for color.”

These three related pleas for color reveal a fascination with “primitive” perceptions that accompanied—and even fueled—the acceleration of visual and media technologies in the early twentieth century. Not only did the new colors produced for industrial design come with exotic-sounding names (one magazine listed “T’ang Red, Orchid of Vincennes, Royal Copenhagen Blue, Ivoire de Medici, [. . .] Ionian Black, [. . .] Ming Green, and Meissen White,” among others), but their saturation and intensity aimed to promote the deeply-felt color experiences long associated with “uncivilized” people (qtd. in “CC” 26).<sup>6</sup> For anthropologist Michael Taussig, this connection between bright colors and “colored” bodies subtends the whole of chromatic experience in the West. He argues that color’s effects—including the mix of enlivened delight and disgusted reproof excited by a “sooty black girl” in a “flaming orange dress”—owe much to the imagination of colonial encounters, and he insists that color itself “gathers together all that is otherwise inarticulate and powerful in the bouquet of imagery and gamut of feelings brought to mind by the ‘Orient.’”<sup>7</sup>

We have, of course, already seen evidence that color’s power resides partly in its ability to invoke the primitive: Hamlin Garland’s naïve vision of the rural landscape, Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s colorful diagnosis of the “savage” conditions of domestic labor, Stephen Crane’s attempts to harness the wild intensity of urban colors, and L. Frank Baum and W. W. Denslow’s wide-eyed depictions of “uncivilized” Oz all rely on the affiliation of bright hues and exotic energies. Yet it is not until the 1920s that writers

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<sup>6</sup> This catalogue of color names comes from “Color in Industry,” an article in the inaugural issue of *Fortune* magazine (1930). Other colors mentioned include “St. Porchaire Brown, Rose du Barry,” and “Clair de Lune Blue.”

<sup>7</sup> Michael Taussig, *What Color Is the Sacred?* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2009), 245, 155. Subsequent citations will appear parenthetically as WCS.

placed the primitive power of color at the center of their aesthetic projects. This shift in accent between the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries emerged from the intersection of a range of cultural trends, including the disillusionment with civilization prompted by World War I, the rise of professional anthropology, and the invention of plastics and lacquers that spread commercial colors into nearly every aspect of consumer life. Such were the conditions for the colorful brand of modernism on display in William Carlos Williams's "The Red Wheelbarrow" (1923), and we have already noted how the gleaming red of that poem shares an affinity with the engineered commercial spaces that proliferated in the 1920s and that Baum's career captures in their incipience. But to grasp the workings of primitive color in modernist literature, and thus to draw out under-examined aspects of the cultural and aesthetic endeavors explored in the preceding chapters, we do better to turn to Larsen's plea rather than to Williams's lyric. Indeed, the group of writers, artists, and cabaret-goers who comprised the movement now known as the Harlem Renaissance approached the possibilities and problems made available by the increased interest in color's savage power with unparalleled insight.<sup>8</sup> Their social position within the racially-striated space of American culture afforded them a perspective on the "bouquet of imagery and gamut of feelings" operating in the

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<sup>8</sup> George Hutchinson and others have outlined misunderstandings fostered by the collapse of the literary, political, and historical movements centered on the New Negro and Harlem in the 1920s into the catch-all term, "Harlem Renaissance." Surely the three major trends of the Negro Renaissance (the flowering of literary and artistic production by African Americans), the New Negro movement (the political and social advocacy for equal rights, often carried out through the development of a distinct racial consciousness and pride), and the Harlem Vogue (the brief fascination with Harlem and its nightlife by white America) had distinct trajectories even as they overlapped in productive and constitutive ways. Though my analysis focuses on what might more properly be called the Negro Renaissance and the Harlem Vogue, I will retain the moniker of the Harlem Renaissance for the sake of convention and for its virtue—which is also its scholarly weakness—of capturing the interrelated energies of the discourses and practices affiliated with the New Negro in the 1920s. For a finer parsing of the various movements and trends packed into the "Harlem Renaissance," and for an account of recent critical approaches to this period, see George Hutchinson's "Introduction" to *The Cambridge Companion to the Harlem Renaissance*, ed. George Hutchinson (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2007), 1-10.

commercial and artistic projects of the 1920s. To adopt a phrase from W. E. B. Du Bois, the “veil” imposed by racism afforded the writers of the Harlem Renaissance a kind of “second-sight,” one that enabled them to see the entanglement of vivid colors and intense color-feelings that undergirded the color line.<sup>9</sup>

In this regard, Helga’s “love of color” and her disdain for the dean of women’s dull sartorial prescriptions constitute a risky performance of racial identity, one that embraces the wider field of early-twentieth-century color developments to fashion an affirmative model of blackness. Color here encompasses more than a visual quality; it captures the full range of what Helga refers to as the race’s “most delightful manifestations”—“radiance,” “joy of rhythmic motion,” “naïve and spontaneous laughter”—all of which were circulated through an expanding network of fashion, advertising, and entertainment, and all of which were suppressed by “race-women” such as the dean (*Q* 17). The aesthetic debates and literary experiments of the Harlem Renaissance thus unfolded in relation to the proliferation of bright colors that changed the visual landscape of the modern U.S. In particular, writers such as Nella Larsen, Claude McKay, and Jean Toomer engaged a colorful world of cabaret lights, cosmetics, and vivid clothing to fashion modern ways of embodying race—to invent the New Negro. They embraced the dizzying array of commercial hues introduced at the turn of the century and accelerated in the 1910s and ‘20s as the sensory and conceptual materials by which black writers could use their blackness to claim an uninhibited, bohemian, and

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<sup>9</sup> W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* [1903], in *Writings* (New York: Library of America, 1986), 364. Du Bois argues that “the Negro is [. . .] born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world”; in particular, the “peculiar sensation” of “double-consciousness”—the “sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others”—affords African Americans insights into the workings of race and racialization in the U.S. For an account of how Du Bois’s remarks relate to turn-of-the-century visual culture, see the introduction and first chapter of Shawn Michelle Smith’s *Photography on the Color Line: W. E. B. Du Bois, Race, and Visual Culture* (Durham, NC: Duke Univ. Press, 2004).



consummately *artistic* sensibility. These experiments took advantage of the expressive possibilities opened by mass culture, even at the risk of allowing an exuberant love of color to feed back into existing stereotypes of African Americans. Nella Larsen was especially attuned to the dangers that accompany public presentations of blackness to white audiences; Claude McKay, though sensitive to these threats, concentrated more on mining the affirmative possibilities excited by modern color to present literary writing as the practice of reconstructed primitivism. Taken together, these writers reveal color as the key trope of the Harlem Renaissance, the figure that binds celebrations of racial variety with paeans to the cabaret and that transforms stereotypes of the sensuous black body into an openness to immediate experience that marks the modern artist.

### **The Savage on the Sidewalk**

At the outset of 1928, looking back over “the chromatic revolution” of the previous decades, the *Saturday Evening Post* announced the arrival of a “New Age of Color.” “One need not leave his own fireside to observe the [. . .] striking signs of the new invasion,” the article explained; “[h]angings, draperies, and floor coverings,” alongside “colored glassware” and even “the humble agateware of pantry and kitchen” all bore the marks of an industry dedicated to “produc[ing] new hues and effects.”<sup>10</sup> Other indications of the “invasion” appeared throughout the year: Macy’s rolled out the Red Star iron, the first in a wave of household appliances to use colored plastic molding; the red, black, ochre, and turquoise façade of Ely Kahn’s Park Avenue Building in New York City was unveiled to the public; and two of the most color-saturated novels of the Harlem

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<sup>10</sup> “The New Age of Color,” *The Saturday Evening Post* (January 21, 1928): 28. Qtd. in Eskilson, “Color and Consumption,” 17.

Renaissance appeared in print: Nella Larsen's *Quicksand* (1928) and Claude McKay's *Home to Harlem* (1928) ("CC" 26, 23). Both of these New Negro texts bear the imprint of the "New Age of Color"; in rollicking scenes of street-side promenades and all-night cabarets, they annex the energies of the increasingly colorful urban environment to experiment with new expressive modes of blackness, creative refashionings of modern primitivism.

The chromatic developments sparked by the nineteenth-century union of industry and organic chemistry expanded their colorful reach to encompass an even wider range of commercial goods in the early decades of the twentieth century. Georges Claude's invention of neon lights in 1915 and the introduction of the more affordable spray-colored bulbs seven years later transformed the night sky into a backdrop for a dancing display of colors spread among the billboards on Broadway and the decorative floodlights illuminating New York's skyscrapers.<sup>11</sup> Likewise, DuPont's development of "Duco," a fast-drying nitrocellulose lacquer, brought the "chromatic revolution" to the automotive industry, and innovations in colored plastics enlivened the growing number of appliances that crowded the modern home, especially those of the kitchen and the bathroom ("CC" 24-25).<sup>12</sup> "Today, color is the modern note everywhere," one commentator wrote in 1930; "[w]e have special color effects in bathrooms, kitchens, cooking utensils, house

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<sup>11</sup> For neon, see William Leach, *The Land of Desire: Merchants, Power, and the Rise of a New American Culture* (New York: Vintage, 1994), 342; for the introduction of floodlights into the American cityscape, see Eskilson, "Color and Consumption," 23-24. Eskilson also lists the "[d]ozens of new technologies [that] facilitated the employment of color in the United States," including "[s]ynthetic lacquers, phenolic resins, spray-colored bulbs, floodlights, electro-mechanical switching systems, and gas-tube lighting" ("CC" 20 n.10). To illustrate the ends to which these new technologies were put, he points to the Chanin building in New York, which "was illuminated in 1929 with a system that was capable of producing two-hundred and twelve different decorative schemes" ("CC" 23-24).

<sup>12</sup> DuPont developed Duco for use on GM's "True Blue" Oakland (1924), the first non-luxury car available in color. Three years later, Ford released the Model A, available in four colors—none of them black. For more on the development of GM's "Art and Color" Section, see Eskilson, "Color and Consumption," 24-25.

furnishings, and even at night some of us climb into bed between colored sheets” (qtd. in “CC” 27). Color crept into even the most intimate areas of life, and an equally colorful program of advertising inserts and multi-hued packaging sprung up to move these goods into as many homes as possible.<sup>13</sup> As a “modern” element that added little to the utility of goods and much to their appeal, color also became a key element of the emerging fashion industry, and decorators and designers advised shoppers on how to coordinate their clothing and make-up or on which colors were in and out of season.<sup>14</sup> The vivid hues in all of these areas “gave a buzz to product” and helped ease the transition into an economy driven by consumption (WCS 234).

These technologies and marketing strategies did more than merely increase the bottom line; as we have already seen, they mobilized associations between vivid colors and exotic perceivers and, in the process, circulated an assembly of movements, perceptions, and affects marked as “primitive” and yet detached from any particular bodies.<sup>15</sup> In the precarious space opened by this detachment, Larsen and McKay experimented with performances of race that incorporated the “black” expressive forms moving through mass and material culture. As such, they exploited the unsettling effects

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<sup>13</sup> Ford’s presentation of the Model A, for instance, was heralded by an “unprecedented two-million-dollar advertising campaign,” which included the boast: “‘The minute you see the picture of the new Ford, you will be delighted with its low, smart lines and the artistic color combinations. There, you will say, is a truly modern car’” (“CC” 25).

<sup>14</sup> For color’s role in the fashion industry, see Leach, *Land of Desire*, 94, 313-17 and Taussig, *What Color is the Sacred?*, 247.

<sup>15</sup> Leach’s *Land of Desire* documents the uses of orientalism in advertising and draws a helpful analogy in the person of Stewart Culin, the curator of the ethnological collection at the Brooklyn Museum. In 1925, Culin opened the Rainbow House, an exhibit of ethnological artifacts displayed against a strikingly colorful background; the same year, he served as the art consultant for the “Palace of Fashion” exhibit in Philadelphia, where he also pushed for color as the keynote of the presentation. Leach sums up the relation between these two projects in a tidy chiasmus: “In the Rainbow House commercial methods were enlisted to exhibit the primitive; in the Palace of Fashion the primitive was exhibited to enhance the appeal of the commercial” (326). For a more general treatment of the use of exotic themes in marketing, see Leach, *Land of Desire*, 104-11.

of modern color media—their oft-noted ability to absorb or enthrall viewers—to “reorder[] inherited patterns of cultural reception” and craft new and imaginative presentations of black identity.<sup>16</sup> To be sure, these experiments jostled against a crowd of racist depictions that incorporated new color media in ever more grotesque distortions of African American lives. But as critic Nancy Bentley notes of turn-of-the-century mass culture, “even the traffic in racist expressive objects belonged to the larger repertoire of pleasurable shocks that had the capacity to loosen inherited dispositions.”<sup>17</sup> Larsen and McKay could not be sure of the outcome of their experiments, but they gambled on accessing the disruptive excitements of color technologies as an energy more amenable to innovative reform than to yesterday’s stereotypes.

In flashing lights and shifting displays, color allied the effects of shock and speed common to other realms of mass culture with an ability to stir intense and absorbing sensory responses in audiences. Praise for color’s entrancing powers stretched high and low: in *The Future of Painting* (1923), art critic Willard Wright cited color’s capacity to “provid[e] us with the highest ecstasies and delights,” and Hulbert Footner, a Canadian detective fiction writer, found the colors of Times Square to produce an irrational revelry: the eye “refuse[s] to disentangle the signs,” he reports, and instead “riots in the general

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<sup>16</sup> Nancy Bentley, *Frantic Panoramas: American Literature and Mass Culture, 1870-1920* (Philadelphia, PA: Univ. of Pennsylvania Press, 2009), 27.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 16. In her study of the formative encounters between late-nineteenth-century writers and mass culture, Bentley argues that despite the presence of racist images, the commercial sphere proved a more productive environment for the reimagining of racial identity than did the lofty realm of literature. “Beholden only to profit,” she explains, “mass culture rewarded novelty, visual flair, and self-display, and thereby produced a paradox: African American performers in New York, Chicago, and other urban centers, discovered that racist styles and caricatures circulating in commercial culture yielded more easily to creative transformation than did the more staid racial typing of literary culture” (203). This chapter extends Bentley’s insights into the colorful realms of 1920s media and the literary efforts of McKay, Larsen, and a few of their contemporaries.

brightness and color.”<sup>18</sup> Such is the primitive threat of color, its ability to dissolve the detached observer in the act of perception, and this mode of color experience became more common with the increase of multi-hued products. The effect was the dislocation of “savage” perceptions from “savage” bodies, a disjunction already initiated when organic chemistry detached the color economy from its initial pathways through colonial trade routes and remapped it onto a modern landscape of industrial science.<sup>19</sup> Nancy Bentley describes the broader context for these divisions between racial expression and racialized bodies: “inside the dizzying spaces of mass culture,” she explains,

an individual’s specific social location no longer seemed to strictly dictate experience or perception, even as traits of specific bodies—the defiant postures of white men, the angular grace of cakewalk dancers, the prowess of the Indian warrior—were among the fragments of sensory subjectivity reproduced in these mimetic zones and newly represented before spectators of both sexes and all class strata.<sup>20</sup>

The color experiences circulated in the 1920s carried associations of primitivism to wide and diverse audiences, and the conjuncture of modern hues and exoticism—on display in descriptions of “[m]otor cars” that “borrow[] their hues from the waters of the Nile, from the sands of Arabia, the plumage of birds and the fire of gems”—must be understood as something more than either orientalism or antimodernism (qtd. in “CC” 17). That is, it must be approached less as a white, middle-class fantasy and more as an occasion to

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<sup>18</sup> Qtd. in Eskilson, “Color and Consumption,” 21; Hulbert Footner, *New York, City of Cities* (Philadelphia and New York: J. B. Lippencott and Co., 1937), 295. Wright was the critical voice of Synchronism, the first fully-realized foray into abstract painting.

<sup>19</sup> For the historical links between color and colonialism, see Taussig’s discussion of chintz fabric and indigo in *What Color is the Sacred?* (130-68). For an account of the changes in the social field effected by the shift from the colonies to the chemistry lab, see Andrew Pickering’s “Decentering Sociology: Synthetic Dyes and Social Theory,” *Perspectives on Science* 13.3 (2005): 353-405.

<sup>20</sup> Bentley, *Frantic Panoramas*, 15.

consider the ways in which modern technologies and media were rearranging the sensorium and fostering new ways of inhabiting one's body.

The writers of the Harlem Renaissance tapped into the sensory rush released by modern colors in their literary figurations of a new black identity. To assert as much is to restore the work of African American writers to the brightly colored urban environment that formed their dynamic material context. Though the significance of the city has long been recognized in studies of the New Negro Movement, critics have stopped short at discussing the social function of Harlem—its role as “the laboratory of a great race-welding”—and have thus overlooked the material aspects of New York that gave texture and cohesion to uptown society: the lights of the cabarets, the clothing of Lenox Avenue strollers, the rouge and powder sold in beauty shops.<sup>21</sup> Langston Hughes captures the integration of these urban colors into the drama of race when he reflects on a trip to Beale Street, delivering his assessment with true Harlemite's pride: “Portions of Fifth or Lenox Avenues in New York's Harlem were [. . .],” he says, “equally tough, equally colorful, and quite as colored as the famous Memphis thoroughfare.”<sup>22</sup> Equally colorful and quite as colored: Hughes's two registers slide into one another in a depiction of 1920s racial performance that is repeated—with even greater relish—in the novels of Claude McKay

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<sup>21</sup> Alain Locke, “The New Negro,” *The New Negro* [1925] (New York: Touchstone, 1992), 7. Historians have been better attuned to the material aspects of urban life than have literary critics; for instance, Davarian L. Baldwin's *Chicago's New Negroes: Modernity, the Great Migration, and Black Urban Life* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2007) analyzes the role of sporting events, movie theaters, beauty parlors, and urban strolling in the emergence of the “new aggressive race conscious” that emerged in the 1910s and '20s. Rather than dismiss the popular or commercial in favor of the artistic or intellectual, he insists that “[t]he pairing of ‘autonomous’ thought and ‘mindless’ consumption within a reconstructed notion of the New Negro and Renaissance suggests new directions for the study of ideas within American life” (19). Though Baldwin treats a number of colorful scenes, he does not address the role of color technologies as such, and his emphasis on Chicago leaves much work to be done on the developments in Harlem.

<sup>22</sup> Langston Hughes, *The Big Sea* [1940], vol. 13 of *The Collected Works of Langston Hughes* (Columbia, MO: Univ. of Missouri Press, 2002), 217.

and Nella Larsen. Like the narrator of *Quicksand*, who takes in the green of Helga's negligee and the yellow of her face with one sweeping and satisfied assessment, Hughes demonstrates the extent to which being "colorful"—and holding a pleasurable relation to those colors—came to mark an integral aspect of being "colored."

When Helga and Hughes delight in colorful scenes, then, they are not exhibiting unrefined tastes or juvenile perceptions so much as they are embracing the sensory receptivity to the material world activated by modern color. They are using color perceptions to open themselves up to what Michael Taussig calls the "bodily unconscious," the "forms of sensateness, of bodily knowing, that exist below the radar of consciousness and are all the more powerful for so being." For Taussig, color always holds the promise of awakening us to how "we are connected, as thinking bodies, to the play of the world," but the associations carried over from the colonial encounter act to bracket these possibilities and to buffer the threat that color poses to the coherence of the rational subject (WCS 15). This tension results in "the combustible mix of attraction and repulsion" towards vivid hues that propels the history of color in the West and that, in the Harlem Renaissance, came to articulate a broader struggle over the proper modes of behavior and expression for African Americans (WCS 9). To reject color meant to uphold the ideals of "bodily restraint" wrapped up in existing models of respectability; to embrace it meant to engage the raucous space of mass consumption that promoted "bodily release" and enabled exuberant efforts at self-fashioning.<sup>23</sup>

Beginning with her plea for color and ending in an unadorned house in Alabama, Helga Crane oscillates between the poles of release and restraint, between an "unreason in which all values were distorted or else ceased to exist" and the "bulwarks" of self-

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<sup>23</sup> Baldwin, *Chicago's New Negroes*, 30.

control (*Q* 5). Her restless energy motors the novel, and Larsen plots *Quicksand*'s course as a zigzagging trajectory driven by Helga's shifting relation to colors and the bodily unconscious they make palpable. In particular, the narrative situates the experience of color within the context of a mounting consumer culture and demonstrates the potentials and pitfalls of loving bold hues in the Harlem Renaissance. At Naxos, Helga's fashion sense gets her into trouble; she "loved clothes, elaborate ones," and her sartorial style distinguishes her from the bleached-out versions of blackness manufactured by the Naxos "machine" (*Q* 17, 4).<sup>24</sup> Her "dark purples, royal blues, rich greens, deep reds, in soft, luxurious woolens, or heavy, clinging silks" render the "inherent racial need" for color as an urge both tactile and visual: the clothing gives the colors texture and thus emphasizes their connection to Helga's sense of embodiment (*Q* 17). This sensory delight in colorful outfits infuses the novel's narrative attention, which regularly pauses to take pleasure in a neat arrangement of clothing: Anne Grey's "cool green tailored frock," Aubrey Denney's "simple apricot dress," Fru Dahl's "olive green" outfit with a "trailing purple scarf and correct black hat," and of course the series of ensembles worn by Helga (*Q* 39, 55, 60). These moments filter the "delightful manifestations" of race that Helga celebrates in her *Plea* through the emerging discourses of fashion and advertising that present color as an individualizing element of a wardrobe.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Larsen too met with consternation over her wardrobe: in fact, George Hutchinson has demonstrated that she left Fisk not at the behest of her family, as earlier biographies suggest, but in protest against the student dress code. Hutchinson, *In Search of Nella Larsen*, 6.

<sup>25</sup> In *Living Up to the Ads* (2000), Simon Weil Davis argues that Helga's search for a viable identity proceeds according to images of desire and individuality defined by fashion discourse in the 1920s. She reads Helga's materialism—her desire for "things, things, thing"—as participating "in the aesthetic lexicon of the advertising industry," and she demonstrates the "copylike" quality of the novel's narration through comparisons with contemporary ad campaigns. Simon Weil Davis, *Living Up to the Ads: Gender Fictions of the 1920s* (Durham, NC: Duke Univ. Press, 2000), 126. For Davis, this complicity with the consumer culture forecloses any hope of authenticity. Though I agree that the market context creates important



But even as Helga distances herself from the uptight women at Naxos, her fashion sense betrays a rather prim sort of primitivism, one whose “release” into color is always balanced by the “restraint” of taste. The reasons for such caution become clear when Helga lands in Denmark to live with her white aunt and uncle: as soon as she arrives, Fru Dahl attempts to outfit her in vibrant clothing that distorts the grounds of Helga’s love of color. ““You must have bright things to set off the color of your lovely brown skin,”” the aunt reasons, ““[s]triking things, exotic things”” (*Q* 62). Helga feels “dubious” and “resentful” at the suggestion: “Certainly she loved color with a passion that perhaps only Negroes and Gypsies know. But she had a deep faith in the perfection of her own taste, and no mind to be bedecked in flaunting flashy things” (*Q* 63). The scene recycles key elements of the plea for color, but in the process it reveals how any appeal to “inherent racial needs”—here understood as the passion particular to “Negroes and Gypsies”—remains open to appropriation and distortion by white audiences, even those with the best of intentions. As a result, the tone of Helga’s wardrobe takes on a sinister character in Copenhagen:

There were batik dresses in which mingled indigo, orange, green, vermilion, and black; dresses of velvet and chiffon in screaming colors, blood-red, sulphur-yellow, sea-green; and one black and white thing in striking combination. There was a black Manila shawl strewn with great scarlet and lemon flowers, a leopard-skin coat, a glittering opera-cape. There were turban-like hats of metallic silks, feathers and furs, strange jewelry, enameled or set with odd semiprecious stones, a nauseous Eastern perfume, shoes with dangerously high heels. (*Q* 67-68)

In place of the “rich,” “royal,” and “soft” garments in her previous clothing, Helga’s new wardrobe presents a “screaming” jungle, full of “blood,” “sulphur,” exotic animals, vivid flowers, and “feathers and fur” full of danger and disease. In Denmark, her perfect taste

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power imbalances, I am most interested in the ways in which Larsen and McKay exploit the productive energies unleashed by market forces to the ends of creating spaces of relative freedom and affirmation.

yields to “the fascinating business of being seen, gaped at, desired” as Larsen dramatizes the dangers of primitive release in a culture eager to find evidence for existing stereotypes (*Q* 68).

Helga’s love of color and its subsequent convolution into an exotic spectacle illustrate the complexities involved in crafting a racial identity from the colorful matter of mass culture. Indeed, Larsen goes to great lengths to demonstrate the extent to which colors can bite back, either as elements of exoticism or as aspects of Helga’s failed attempts to turn her attractiveness into power.<sup>26</sup> But *Quicksand* is a novel that tosses and turns, and in the midst of its pessimism about racial identity—Helga never seems to “fit” anywhere other than her well-appointed room—it finds moments of release connected to the enjoyment of urban strolling. Once in Chicago, Helga takes in “the shops and streets with their gay colors” and feels “an uncontrollable desire to mingle with the crowd” (*Q* 29, 27). She wastes no time in diving in: “as she stepped out into the moving multi-colored crowd, there came to her a queer feeling of enthusiasm, as if she were tasting some agreeable, exotic food—sweetbreads, smothered with truffles and mushrooms—perhaps” (*Q* 28). Helga’s “queer feeling of enthusiasm” performs “taste” as a rich, sensory revelry in the colorful and colored crowd, a cosmopolitan enjoyment of the beautiful diversity on display in “the hustling streets of the Loop district” (*Q* 29).<sup>27</sup> In

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<sup>26</sup> Ann E. Hostetler’s “The Aesthetics of Race and Gender in Nella Larsen’s *Quicksand*” (*PMLA* 105.1 [1990]: 35-46) tracks the ways in which “[t]he fascination with clothing and color that marks [Helga’s] character is an attempt to construct a female identity, to use her attractiveness as power” (35). Likewise, in *Nella Larsen, Novelist of the Harlem Renaissance: A Woman’s Life Unveiled* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State Univ. Press, 1994), Thadious Davis treats Helga’s taste in terms of “a controlling discourse on gender” (253).

<sup>27</sup> Mary Esteve and Ross Posnock have each argued that this “aimless strolling,” rather than participate in the new expressions of black identity played out on city streets, instead contributes to a non-identitarian project of undermining the very structures of subjectivity that enable racial classification (*Q* 29). In *Color and Culture: Black Writers and the Making of the Modern Intellectual* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ.

these moments, caught in the rush of black urban modernity, Helga feels “that she had come home” (*Q* 28).

The glimmers of “home” that Helga finds in the expressive spaces of city streets receive a robust articulation in a different debut novel published the same year as *Quicksand*: Claude McKay’s *Home to Harlem*. Like Larsen, McKay figures “home” not in terms of domesticity—the main characters spend most of their time rootless—but as the vibrant energies of colorful crowds and mass culture that opened new spaces for the performance of African American identity. But unlike Larsen, he embraces the rambunctious elements of Harlem life with what at times seems a reckless abandon, preferring to mine the creative potential of New York’s masses rather than to highlight the dangers of presenting an uncensored version of black life to white audiences. This is not naivety; it’s simply a commitment to connecting literary writing to the affirmative models of blackness being forged on the sidewalks of Lenox Avenue and the dance floors of speakeasies.<sup>28</sup> And in *Home to Harlem*, this effort unfolds largely through an

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Press, 1998), Posnock reads Helga’s love of crowds as part of her rejection of “whatever imposes order and coherence” and, from there, situates her city-strolling in a lineage of “anti-race” writers who oppose the repressive maneuvers that create identity (79). Esteve takes a similar tack; she draws on turn-of-the-century crowd psychology to argue for Larsen’s engagement with a dispersed mode of subjectivity “made available by urban modernity,” one that “disrupt[s] the order and practices imposed on her by the determination not only of Anglo-American but also African-American culture.” Mary Esteve, “Nella Larsen’s ‘Moving Mosaic’: Harlem, Crowds, and Anonymity,” *American Literary History* 9.2 (summer 1997), 269. For both critics, Helga’s moments of reverie slip the bounds of race to achieve an a-subjective mode of experience. Yet as interesting as these arguments are, they fail to register the extent to which the ecstasies of cabaret-dancing and street-side promenading were themselves performances of racial identity rather than attempts to abolish them. They mistake the reconstruction of race for its complete dismissal.

<sup>28</sup> Of all the charges leveled at McKay—and there have been many since W. E. B. Du Bois first said that “the dirtier parts of” *Home to Harlem* left him wanting to “tak[e] a bath”—the most damaging is that his affirmative vision of the black masses recapitulates the gender imbalances that structured consumer culture around male desire. Indeed, *Home to Harlem* stands guilty as charged, and it may be that McKay escapes the distortions of feeling and color that characterize *Quicksand* only by ignoring these historical inequalities. For this reason, I have paired Larsen’s critical eye with McKay’s experimental enthusiasm in the hopes of capturing both the excitement and reservations that surrounded mass culture in the Harlem Renaissance. W. E. B. Du Bois, “The Browsing Reader: Review of *Home to Harlem*,” *Crisis*, 35 (June 1928), 202.

attunement to color and the forms of bodily awareness and cosmopolitan openness it makes available.

Claude McKay's characters are true denizens of the modern city. They ride the subway, cruise the avenues, dance to hit songs played on phonographs, and brag about celebrities they spot on the street. As soon as Jake, the novel's central character, returns to Harlem after living and fighting in Europe, he checks his suitcase and goes "for a promenade on Seventh Avenue between One Hundred and Thirty-fifth and One Hundred and Fortieth Streets."<sup>29</sup> While he walks, he "thrill[s] to Harlem"; "his whole body" becomes "a flaming wave," and his newfound partner, a woman named Felice, feels "blinded under the overwhelming force" of the city (*HH* 12). They resonate with uptown New York and spend much of the novel maintaining this pitch of intensity. In this regard, *Home to Harlem* captures the same enthusiastic feelings dramatized in *Quicksand*—after all, Helga too "thrilled" at the "gorgeous panorama of Harlem" (*Q* 42)—but rather than fold them into a Bildungsroman, it uses them to convey a general tone or feeling of African American life in the 1920s.

For McKay, the "thrill" of Harlem resides largely in its colors. As such, he packs his first novel with motley ensembles of clothing, skin tones, and cosmetics that revel in the multi-hued displays of the city. Take the following scene of street life:

The broad pavements of Seventh Avenue were colorful with promenaders. Brown babies in white carriages pushed by little black brothers wearing nice sailor suits. All the various and varying pigmentation of the human race were assembled there: dim brown, clear brown, rich brown, chesnut, copper, yellow, near-white, mahogany, and gleaming anthracite. [. . .] The girls passed by in bright batches of color, according to station and calling. High class, menial class, and the big trading class, flaunting a front of

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<sup>29</sup> Claude McKay, *Home to Harlem* [1928], forward by Wayne F. Cooper (Boson, MA: Northeastern Univ. Press, 1987), 10. Subsequent citations refer to this edition and appear parenthetically as *HH*.

chiffon-soft colors framed in light coats, seizing the fashion of the day to stage a lovely leg show. (*HH* 289-90)

The pageantry of the scene blends the vibrant hues of fashion and the cabaret—McKay invokes a “lovely leg show”—with the colorful skin tones of Harlem’s residents: colored becomes colorful and colorful colored as the narrator “seiz[es]” the material displays that “stage” a modern performance of racial identity. If the invocations of “chiffon-soft colors” and diverse urban crowds weren’t enough, McKay then dims the hues of the scene (“Twilight was enveloping the Belt”) only to bring them back up with technological flair: “The animation subsided into a moment’s pause, a muffled, tremulous, soul-stealing note . . . then electric lights flared everywhere, flooding the scene with dazzling gold” (*HH* 291). What historian Davarian L. Baldwin says of the Stroll in Chicago here holds for Seventh Avenue; the street stands as a “public showcase for black ‘expressive behavior,’” a “moving theater [. . .] where black people were staging new versions of blackness in the particular ways they looked and were looked at within the structured space of local exhibition.”<sup>30</sup> As McKay’s promenades made clear, the perceptual acts to which Baldwin refers were nothing if not dazzled by color.

*Home to Harlem* not only describes these experiments in self-presentation but also positions itself within the viewing crowd. When the narrator details the wide windows of Goldgraben’s cabaret, where the “joy-loving ladies and gentlemen of the Belt collected to show their striking clothes and beautiful skin,” he cannot help but join in the fun: “Oh, it was some wonderful sight to watch them from the pavement!” (*HH* 29). The novel is dotted with delighted descriptions of colorful ensembles, some of them connected to Jake (who “loved women’s pretty clothes”) others free floating (*HH* 210).

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<sup>30</sup> Baldwin, *Chicago’s New Negroes*, 45.

Felice first appears as “a brown” who “had tinted her leaf-like face to a ravishing chesnut”; she wears “an orange scarf over a green frock” with “champagne-colored stockings” (*HH* 11). Susy offers a different arrangement when she arrives at the cabaret in a “fur coat of rich shiny black, like her complexion,” over “a cerise blouse and a yellow-and-mauve check shirt,” and she “flaunt[s] a green hat with a decoration of red ostrich plumes” (*HH* 95). In all of the many such descriptions in the novel, McKay inflects his language with a celebratory tone that proved out of reach to many of his contemporaries. Surely such an easy-going appraisal of a woman as dark as Susy—whom the narrator finds to be “wonderfully created” (*HH* 57)—could never exist in a novel like Wallace Thurman’s *The Blacker the Berry* (1929), where Emma Lou’s “luscious black complexion” must immediately be branded “a liability” and even “a decided curse.”<sup>31</sup> Yet in the space of *Home to Harlem*, the pleasurable color perceptions generated by the modern city extend to the people wearing the clothing; the panoramic thrills of Broadway’s lights are brought into contact with the sites of Lenox Avenue.

The explosion of material hues in the 1920s thus becomes an occasion for the celebration of human variety, and McKay’s attunement to “all the various and varying pigmentation of the human race” performs a cosmopolitan tolerance rooted in an urban, bohemian sensibility (*HH* 290). Color catalogs like the one mentioned above (“dim

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<sup>31</sup> Wallace Thurman, *The Blacker the Berry* [1929] (Mineola, NY: Dover, 2008), 1. Thurman’s novel details the ways in which Emma Lou’s internalization of color prejudice poisons her self-image and prevents any hope for true racial solidarity. Early on, he provides the counter-scene for Helga’s “plea for color” and the depictions of colorful characters in *Home to Harlem* when Emma Lou meets Hazel, a school mate from a newly-rich family. Worrying over Hazel’s brightly-colored clothing, Emma Lou muses,

Negroes always bedecked themselves and their belongings in ridiculously unbecoming colors and ornaments. It seemed to be part of their primitive heritage which they did not seem to have sense enough to forget and deny. Black girl—white hat—red-and-white-striped sport suit—white shoes and stockings—red roaster. The picture was complete. All Hazel needed to complete her circus-like appearance, though Emma Lou, was to have some purple feathers stuck in her hat. (18)

Where Thurman uses bitter satire to address the harmful effects of color prejudice—understood as an antipathy both to vivid clothing and to dark-skinned bodies—McKay attempts to perform the sorts of color perceptions that would build the community Thurman fears will never come.

brown, clear brown, [. . .])” reappear in the novel during moments of great excitement. For instance, as Jake takes in the nightlife at the Congo Rose, the narration describes the dancers in a list that gives detail to Helga’s sensation of tasting the crowds along the Stroll: “Dandies and pansies, chocolate, chesnut, coffee, ebony, cream, yellow, everybody was teased up the high point of excitement . . .” (*HH* 32).<sup>32</sup> The passage reads more like a dessert menu than a description of skin tones, and the sweet sensations of taking in the entire crowd transfers the “high point of excitement” from the dance floor to the audience. Elsewhere, McKay presents the proliferation of new skin tones in Harlem as matching the concomitant increase in material colors. “Civilization had brought strikingly exotic types into Susy’s race,” the narrator explains; “Ancient black life rooted upon its base with all its fascinating new layers of brown, low-brown, high-brown, nut-brown, lemon, maroon, olive, mauve, and gold” (*HH* 57). The aggregating effects of the one-drop rule—the way in which all those with “Negro” ancestry were considered black—here appear as the biological analogues to modern chemistry: each generates “exotic” new colors as the fruits of “civilization.” Moreover, each produces mauve.<sup>33</sup> Alternatively sweet and scientific, the “strikingly exotic types” on display in McKay’s

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<sup>32</sup> Ellipses such as this one occur throughout the novel, often to signal moments of erotic desire or sensuous revelry.

<sup>33</sup> This passage points to a different context for the fine-grained attention to color differences that runs throughout the Harlem Renaissance. In particular, the rediscovery of Mendel’s work at the turn of the twentieth century sparked inquiries into the causes and significance of human variation that were given wider treatment under the umbrella of population genetics. As the mechanisms of the chromosome came to be understood—through the help of synthetic dyes that rendered them visible under a microscope—biologists and anthropologists studied variations in skin tone as ways to track the interactions of human genes. Bronislaw Malinowski, for instance, wrote home to his wife after a visit to America that “[t]he question of race, the mixing of race, of human Mendelism, might be studied in the United States.” Qtd. in Hutchinson, *In Search of Nella Larsen*, 203.

Of the writers mentioned in this paper, Wallace Thurman is the most relevant to an investigation of population genetics and the Harlem Renaissance. *The Blacker the Berry* consistently treats skin tones as the result of specific sexual unions and even cites the notion of “color chromosomes” to explain “nature’s perversity” in making Emma Lou darker than her mother. Thurman, *The Blacker the Berry*, 8.

color catalogs always call for the reader's admiration; they beckon us to feel the excitement of the moving colors and to get "teased up" in the process.

Larsen, too, offers a paean to what Langston Hughes called "a whole rainbow of life above 110<sup>th</sup> Street," but Helga's mood serves to dampen the narrator's enthusiasm.<sup>34</sup> While at a cabaret during one of her last nights in Harlem before leaving for Denmark, Helga watches as "the crowd became a swirling mass":

For the hundredth time she marveled at the gradations within this oppressed race of hers. A dozen shades slid by. There was sooty black, shiny black, taupe, mahogany, bronze, copper, gold, orange, yellow, peach, ivory, pinky white, and pasty white. There was yellow hair, brown hair, black hair; straight hair, straightened hair, curly hair, crinkly hair, woolly hair. She saw black eyes in white faces, brown eyes in yellow faces, gray eyes in brown faces, blue eyes in tan faces. (Q 54)

Larsen's staccato catalog produces a dizzying array of hues and images; the speed of cabaret sets the pace of passage, and the narrator takes pleasure in translating the "fantastic motley" of life into language. Helga, on the other hand, holds back: "she was blind to its charm, purposely aloof and a little contemptuous, and soon her interest in the moving mosaic waned" (Q 55). Fresh from an ecstatic spin on the dance floor that ended in shameful self-reproach, Helga sees the scene through a cloud of propriety that keeps her wed to that horrified matron as much as the dark-skinned girl in the "flaming orange dress."

For McKay, these colorful inventories of skin tones, with their invocations of urban speeds and materials, constitute a crucial resource for African American art that had too often been passed over in favor of presenting a uniform and respectable front. In an otherwise positive review of the hit Harlem musical *Shuffle Along* (1921), McKay chides the producers for using cosmetics to flatten the chromatic variety of the cast.

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<sup>34</sup> Hughes, *The Big Sea*, 271.



“Instead of making up to achieve a uniform near-white complexion,” he writes, “the chorus might have made up to accentuate the diversity of shades among ‘Afro Americans’ and let the white audiences in on the secret of the color nomenclature of the Negro world.” McKay lists “chocolate, chocolate-to-the-bone, brown, low-brown, teasing-brown,” and several other shades as evidence of the “interesting” differences elided on the stage, and he calls for future artists and writers to embrace these aspects of Harlem life, even at the risk of being misunderstood by white audiences.<sup>35</sup>

*Home to Harlem* puts McKay’s theory into practice; the novel shows African Americans “making up” in order to amplify rather than wash-out their skin color, and in so doing it incorporates the colored matter of rouges and powders into its urban performance of racial identity. After all, cosmetics in the 1920s came in more colors than simply “white.” Thousands more. By the time of *Home to Harlem* and *Quicksand*, hundreds of shades of rouge and over three thousand varieties of powder were available to consumers, and many of these products—such as “High Brown” and “Golden Brown” powder—specifically targeted African Americans.<sup>36</sup> Cosmetics played a varied role in the history of the New Negro, providing venues for race pride and economic advancement on the one hand and enforcing white models of beauty on the other, but in his first novel McKay emphasizes the opportunities for using new color products to create a new “colored” people.<sup>37</sup> Rather than dampen and distort skin tone, make-up here

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<sup>35</sup> Claude McKay, “A Negro Extravaganza” [1921], *The Passion of Claude McKay; Selected Poetry and Prose, 1912-1948*, ed. with intro. by Wayne F. Cooper (New York: Schocken Books, 1973), 64.

<sup>36</sup> Kathy Peiss, *Hope in a Jar: The Making of America’s Beauty Culture* (New York: Metropolitan, 1998), 103.

<sup>37</sup> For the history of cosmetics as it relates to the emergence of the New Negro, see the seventh chapter of Peiss’s *Hope in a Jar* and the second chapter of Baldwin’s *Chicago’s New Negroes*. Both analyze the ways in which Madam C. J. Walker and Anthony Overton pioneered the use of cosmetics as tools of uplift that

“heightens” and “emphasizes” difference. At Madame Suarez’s buffet flat, the women have “their arms and necks and breasts tinted to emphasize the peculiar richness of each skin,” and at Madame Laura’s, “[t]he girls’ complexion was heightened by High-Brown talc powder and rouge” (*HH* 105, 193). Make-up gives “a striking exotic appearance” to these girls, tinting their brown skin “a warm, insidious chesnut color” that was “[r]are as the red flower of the hibiscus would be in a florist’s window on Fifth Avenue” (*HH* 196). Yet women aren’t the only one’s making up to create striking images; in fact, the most painted character in the novel is the “straw-colored boy” who performs at the Congo Rose. He wears “high-brown powder, his eyebrows [are] elongated and blackened up, his lips streaked with the dark rouge so popular in Harlem, and his carefully-straightened hair lay[s] plastered and glossy under Madam Walker’s absinthe-colored salve ‘for milady of fashion and color’” (*HH* 91). In this “striking advertisement of the Ambrozone Palace of Beauty,” McKay bends gender codes and intensifies bodily color to present what *Shuffle Along* avoided: a flamboyant and confident celebration of African American life in all of its shades.

Whether in rouge and powder or street lights and “chiffon-soft colors,” the new hues of urban modernity entered into the experiments with black identity that gave birth to the New Negro. The material context of the city provided an essential component in

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provided new jobs for black women and that promoted racial pride in a healthy appearance. They also treat the ways in which make-up ads promoted exotic images of dark-skinned beauty, and they discuss the role of face powder, skin-lighteners, and hair-straighteners in the institution of white male conceptions of beauty within the African American community.

Simultaneous with the expanded cosmetics market came a shift in beauty concepts away from pale complexions and towards dark, tanned skin, and by the late 1920s, Peiss explains, white women “could confidently declare that lily white complexion was ‘passé’—that skin tone was a matter of fashion, that a dark complexion was one choice among many.” As a result, “skin color seemed to be drifting from its biological moorings” in much the same way as the movements and rhythms associated with blackness circulated apart from black bodies in the space of mass culture. Peiss, *Hope in a Jar*, 151, 224. In the terms of this chapter, cosmetics provided yet another modern color development that created a space in which expressive characteristics of blackness—in this case, dark skin—could be crafted and communicated.

the acts of self-fashioning dramatized in *Quicksand* and *Home to Harlem*, and the performances of urban strolling and pleasurable receptivity to colorful shocks by Helga and Jake encourage open attitudes of tolerance that drew from the sensory demands made on the body by commercial hues. For writers in the Harlem Renaissance, modern colors provided both the tools to stage an affirmative model of blackness and the means by which to ready white audiences to receive it.

### **How It Feels to Be Colored Me**

If the promenades along Lenox Avenue capture the modernity of Harlem's colors, the movement and lights of the cabaret reveal the "primitive" energies released in these spectacles of race. Invocations of jungles and painted savages almost always accompany descriptions of jazz clubs in the 1920s, and the role of color in these scenes moves beyond that of a prop in a racial performance to offer itself as a sensory quality that opens the body onto the rhythms and perceptions of Harlem life. The physical hues foster a sensory receptivity that proves crucial for bringing the new expressions of African American identity into writing and, indeed, for crafting blackness itself as a shifting and relational quality, one grounded in material bodies but not reducible to them.

Sparkling with colorful lights and filled with the syncopated rhythms of jazz, cabarets encouraged unrestrained movement and bodily release. They assemble all of the "delightful manifestations" of the race that Helga praises against the restrictions of Naxos, and they appear in *Home to Harlem* as expressions of the creative black masses that offer an alternative to the work-a-day composure of the white world. When Jake and Felice enter a newly-opened and Jewish-owned venue, the narrator describes the interior

as a space tailor-made for those races who “love color”: “[t]he owner of the cabaret knew that Negro people, like his people, love the pageantry of life [. . .]. And so he had assembled his guests under an enchanting blue ceiling of brilliant chandeliers and a dome of artificial roses bowered among green leaves.” “Great mirrors reflected the variegated colors and poses” in the crowd, and “multicolored sidelights glowed softly along the golden walls” (*HH* 320). The setting caters to and stimulates the love of “sumptuous [. . .] and luxurious surroundings” that the novel presents as the domain of blackness, and the narrator then figures the attunement to sensory life promoted by the cabaret as a whirl of hues both colorful and colored:

It was a scene of blazing color. Soft, barbaric, burning, savage, clashing, planless colors—all rioting together in wonderful harmony. There is no human sight so rich as an assembly of Negroes ranging from lacquer black through brown to cream, decked out in their ceremonial finery. Negroes are like trees. They wear all colors naturally. And Felice, rouged to a ravishing maroon, and wearing a close-fitting, chrome-orange frock and cork-brown slippers, just melted into the scene. (*HH* 320)

To be a Negro here means to hold a natural relation to colors, to enjoy a “savage” and “barbaric” ability to feel one’s way into riotous scene in order to experience its chaos as a “wonderful harmony.” Felice shows the way: before she can “melt[] into the scene,” she must pass through the “ravishing maroon” and “chrome-orange” of fashion. Through clothing and cosmetics, she colors herself into the panorama of Harlem.

In McKay’s cabarets, the savagery of the dancers marks the eruption of the bodily unconscious conjured by colors. As such, jungle metaphors weave throughout the jazz scenes: in the “savage ecstatic dream” of a pianist, the “wild rhythm” of a dancer, and the images of leopards, lizards, and jackals evoked by a band’s performance (*HH* 94, 196). Under the spinning spotlights, people become “gorgeous animals” “abandon[ing]

themselves to pure voluptuous jazzing” (*HH* 108).<sup>38</sup> In these moments, the narrative abandons its attention to individual dancers in favor of the colorful moods that wash over them: “Red moods, black moods, golden moods. Curious, syncopated slipping-over into one mood, backsliding back into the first mood” (*HH* 54). The atmosphere of the club takes on a colorful charge that pervades the scene and endows it with a vibrant, shifting unity. Elsewhere, McKay envisions this qualitative cohesion when Ray, Jake’s educated Haitian friend, nearly overdoses on cocaine. In the midst of his dreamlike and drugged state, Ray experiences the world as a “blue paradise” in which “[e]verything was in gorgeous blue of heaven”: “Woods and streams were blue, and men and women and animals, and beautiful to see and love. And he was a blue bird in flight and a blue lizard in love. And life was all blue happiness.” Like the dancers in a cabaret, Ray becomes a series of “gorgeous animals” as he abandons himself to the wash of blue, and within this colorful medium all “[t]aboos and terrors and penalties were transformed into new pagan delights, orgies of Orient-blue carnival” (*HH* 158). Color fosters a pleasurable release in the primitive experience of immersed bodily movement.

This sense that the experience of feeling “colored” in America has much to do with the vibrant moods and primitive urges called up by the cabaret informs a central

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<sup>38</sup> Helga, too, abandons herself to the ecstasies of the cabaret, only to pull back. The scene stands as one of the most vivid (and often cited) in the entire novel:

They danced, ambling lazily to a crooning melody, or violently twisting their bodies, like whirling leaves, to a sudden streaming rhythm, or shaking themselves ecstatically to a thumping of unseen tomtoms. For the while, Helga was oblivious of the reek of flesh, smoke, and alcohol, oblivious of the oblivion of other gyrating pairs, oblivious of the color, the noise, and the grand distorted childishness of it all. She was drugged, lifted, sustained, by the extraordinary music, blown out, ripped, beaten out, by the joyous, wild, murky orchestra. The essence of life seemed bodily motion. (*Q* 54)

But this immersion in the present moment soon lifts, and Helga, recasting her primitive experience through the evaluative rubric of “respectability,” feels with “shameful certainty that not only had she been in the jungle but that she had enjoyed it.” This realization only solidifies her determination to leave Harlem; “[s]he wasn’t, she told herself, a jungle creature” (*Q* 54). *Quicksand*’s “jungle” thus displays a greater attention to the ways in which ecstatic figurations of blackness might feed into white stereotypes, and, as we noted about Helga’s clothing, this awareness results in Helga’s jerky and abortive course in the novel.

passage of Zora Neale Hurston's essay "How It Feels to Be Colored Me" (1928), published the same year as *Home to Harlem*. To illustrate an instance in which she is made to feel her race, Hurston describes a scene in the New World Cabaret: she and a white person listen to a jazz orchestra. The "narcotic harmonies" and "rambunctious" sounds of the music assume the form of a wild animal that "rears on its hind legs" and "claws" through "the tonal veil" until it reaches "the jungle beyond." The orchestra sweeps Hurston into the primal scene, and she quickly finds herself "in the jungle and living in the jungle way": "My face is painted red and yellow and my body is painted blue. My pulse is throbbing like a war drum." The music stops, and Hurston "creep[s] back slowly to the veneer we call civilization" to find her white companion "sitting motionless in his seat, smoking calmly." When he remarks, "'Good music they have here,'" Hurston realizes the difference between them: "Music! The great blobs of purple and red emotion have not touched him. He has only heard what I have felt." At such moments, she feels, "[h]e is so pale with his whiteness [. . .] and I am so colored."<sup>39</sup> The essay stretches the category of color to link the enthusiasm of the painted savage to the excitement stirred by a jazz number, and like Ray's Oriental vision and the colorful moods in *Home to Harlem*, it presents the emotions stirred by music as something to be *felt* rather than heard. In both of these texts, the feeling of being colored is inseparable from the ability to feel bright colors, including the "great blobs of purple and red emotion" that the pale white world fails to register. Race emerges from the juxtaposed sensations of experiencing the bright colors of music as full-bodied excitement and of feeling racially "colored" in relation to white audiences.

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<sup>39</sup> Zora Neale Hurston, "How It Feels to Be Colored Me" [1928], in *The Best American Essays of the Century*, ed. by Joyce Carol Oates; coed. by Robert Atwan (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Co., 2000), 116.

Hurston's diction is essential: *feeling* colored rather than *being* colored. Under Franz Boas, Hurston learned to approach cultures as flexible, changing entities that developed in relation to their material surroundings and intercultural contacts. She did not dismiss culture, but she thought of it as an ensemble of bodily practices and ways of feeling that were historical and contingent rather than static and essential. Ethnography thus involves taking up the practices and feelings distinct to a particular culture and translating their "tone" onto the page, and it is in this regard, according to Taussig, that the methods of participant observation owe much to the connection between color perceptions and color feelings that Hurston and McKay establish in their cabarets. Taussig calls this the affinity between color and "color"—literal color and local color—and he tracks the relation between the two realms by comparing the diaries kept by Bronislaw Malinowski during his field work in Trobriand and the convention-setting ethnographies he later produced from this research. Malinowski filled his private writing with vivid descriptions of tropical colors ("Sariba a blazing magenta; fringe of palms with pink trunks rising out of the blue sea"), and he often recorded the sensation of losing himself in the saturated hues that surrounded him (qtd. in WCS 83). Taussig glosses these moments as eruptions on par with "pure voluptuous jazzing"; Malinowski's diaries, he suggests, show that "color in the tropics for the sensitive European can reorient the body as much as the mind [. . .], thereby opening up what I call the bodily unconscious" (WCS 94). Color encourages a bodily awareness that then enables Malinowski to feel the "color" of New Guinea, much like the colorful lights and clothing of cabaret allow Hurston and the characters of *Home to Harlem* to sense the full vitality of the jazz music and thus to feel themselves colored.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> In this way, the writers of the Harlem Renaissance continue the tradition of local color established by

Malinowski's dairies thus help us to recognize both the broader role of color in Harlem Renaissance writing and the relation such literary hues have to early-twentieth-century anthropology (a relation well-captured in Hurston's career). The lyrical refrains of Jean Toomer's *Cane* (1923) and the motley assortments of Wallace Thurman's Harlem sketches (1927) each adopt color as a key element in their depictions of African American life. In the first section of *Cane*, for instance, Toomer laces his sketches of rural Georgia with sensual descriptions of skin tones that establish and modulate a literary atmosphere. Karantha's "skin like dusk on the eastern horizon"; Carma's "mangrooved-gloomed, yellow flower face"; and Fern's skin like "soft cream foam" all draw their hues from the Southern landscape and, as they weave throughout the prose, acquire an almost talismanic quality meant to invoke the vital powers Toomer locates in the soil.<sup>41</sup> *Cane*'s second section then shifts to the urban centers of Chicago and Washington, D. C. to track the transformations wrought on African American expression by the metropolitan environment. The colors continue to convey the tone of the sketches and poems, but they exchange their earthy qualities for the vibrant neon of the city: "orange," "lemon-colored," and "blue" faces replace the previous images of dusk, cream, and flowers, and the natural light of the sun and moon yields to the "arc-lights" and "yellow globes" of city streets (*C* 52, 53, 63, 75, 57). In sketches such as "Theater" and "Box Seat," women gain an erotic allure through brightly-colored clothing and the spotlights of the stage, and in "Her Lips Are Copper Wires," sexual energy assumes the qualities of flashing "billboards" and "incandescent" lights (*C* 57). Throughout the text,

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Hamlin Garland in the 1890s; for an analysis of this approach to writing, and its roots in physiological aesthetics, see Chapter One of this dissertation.

<sup>41</sup> Jean Toomer, *Cane* [1923], ed. Darwin T. Turner (New York: Norton, 1988), 3, 12, 17. Subsequent citations refer to this edition and appear parenthetically as *C*.



colors mark the physical and social relations of the characters and help to establish the “feel” of its various locales; no wonder, then, that W. E. B. Du Bois praised Toomer for “paint[ing] things that are true, not with Dutch exactness, but rather with an impressionist’s sweep of color.”<sup>42</sup>

The “sweep of color” that courses through Toomer’s work also engulfs the “vivid word pictures” of Harlem penned by Wallace Thurman in 1927. Published in periodicals such as *American Monthly* and *The World Tomorrow*, these sketches move from rich descriptions of the “colored lights” and costumes into evocations of the “color” of life uptown.<sup>43</sup> In the Bamboo Inn, “a large gyroreflector [. . .] fleck[s] the room with triangular bits of vari-colored light,” but these multihued effects account for only a fraction of what makes the speakeasy “more colorful and more full of spontaneous joy” than the popular establishments frequented by whites (CW 49, 48). The greater difference comes from the presence of the “great proletarian mass [. . .] that gives the community its color and fascination” (CW 46). Thurman’s sketches seek to capture this “interesting and important element in Harlem” through artistic vision: he sees Seventh Avenue as “a hodge podge of color and forms, flowing along to the tune of jazz rythms,” and he follows the “[m]asterpieces of flesh, form and color” as they “irrigate” the streets (CW 46, 33, 32).

He renders the city as a sparkling piece of jewelry, “moving, colorful, and richly studded

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<sup>42</sup> W. E. B. Du Bois, “[Sexual Liberation in *Cane*],” in Toomer, *Cane*, 171. The excerpt comes from W. E. B. Du Bois and Alain Locke, “The Younger Literary Movement,” *Crisis* 27 (February 1924): 161-63. Like the impressionists, Toomer was interested in the relational effects of color, and in the second section of *Cane* he pays particular attention to the interplay of skin tones and lights. In “Bona and Paul,” Art’s face “is a healthy pink the blue of the evening tints a purple pallor,” and the “pink lights of the Crimson Gardens [give] a glow and immediacy to white faces” (C 75, 77). “Box Seat” even includes that hallmark of impressionist vision, the purple shadow: Muriel wears an “orange dress” and “[p]ale purple shadows rest on the planes of her cheeks. Deep purple comes from her thick-shocked hair. Orange of the dress goes well with these” (C 64).

<sup>43</sup> Wallace Thurman, *The Collected Writings of Wallace Thurman: A Harlem Renaissance Reader*, ed. Amritjit Singh and Danial M. Scott III (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers Univ. Press, 2003), 32. Subsequent citations refer to this edition and appear parenthetically as CW.

with contrasting elements and contradictory types,” and he insists that its atmosphere eludes those who hold themselves back from the flow: “Harlem is not to be seen. Or heard. *It must be felt*” (CW 35, 33, emphasis added).

In McKay, Hurston, Toomer, and Thurman, color acts as a trope for blackness: it marks a feeling, something grounded in material experience and yet expansive enough to include the complex emotional tones that exceed any one form of sense experience. The literal colors of Harlem nightlife, combined as they are with movement and music, provide occasions for enjoying the rich “color” of the New Negro; the experience of intense hues at once activates and figures the primitive qualities of cabareting. Harlem Renaissance writers claimed these colors as their own, and in so doing they cast race as a feeling-tone, an atmosphere that encompasses the “spiritual” aspects of racial experience without essentializing them. After all, feelings and colors are in constant movement, and this image of evolving, relational entities appealed to writers committed to reinventing the inherited discourse of blackness.

### **Art and Savage Life**

Jean Toomer hesitated to be identified as a Negro writer. He had the blood of many nations coursing through his veins, he reasoned, and if anything he belonged to a new “American” race emerging from the interracial contacts facilitated by international trade and modern politics. But when he recounted his experience writing *Cane* to the *Liberator*, Toomer, like so many modernists of his day, aligned his artistic abilities with the characteristics of blackness. He notes that despite his attempts to create a “spiritual fusion” that mingled his many racial inheritances, his “growing need for artistic

expression” pulled him “deeper and deeper into the Negro group,” and this embrace of African American culture nurtured his literary potential: “my powers of receptivity increased,” he reports, and he felt his “creative talent” “stimulated and fertilized.”<sup>44</sup> An immersion in black communities, it seems, helped Toomer not only to write about African Americans but simply to write at all. Indeed, the authors of the Harlem Renaissance developed their colorful figurations of blackness alongside an aesthetic discourse that championed sensory receptivity and an attunement to affective quality—key components in the practice of “feeling colored”—as essential attributes of the modern artist. These two projects, the racial and the artistic, converged within a reconstructed notion of primitivism that informs both the literary ambitions of Ray in *Home to Harlem* and the aesthetic theory that John Dewey developed in the late-1920s and early-1930s. Pragmatist aesthetics and New Negro fiction each attempt to extract the vital elements of savage life—made palpable in the experience of color—to craft intense aesthetic encounters.

For Claude McKay, Jake’s bohemian charm cannot alone produce art; Jake can feel Harlem, but he cannot communicate it. Thus, *Home to Harlem* introduces Ray, an aspiring artist able to incorporate the energy of the black masses into a modern literary project. The friendship between these two characters unfolds as a meditation on the possibilities of translating the colors of uptown New York into a linguistic form capable of moving beyond the borders of the Black Belt. Only through a Ray-like presentation of Jake’s urban strolling might those promenades touch the level of shared, sensory life on which the impulses, urges, and habits that buttress racial prejudice might be reconfigured. Writing, understood as an activity that enables a deeply-felt impression of one’s

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<sup>44</sup> Qtd. in Darwin T. Turner, “Introduction [to the 1975 Edition of *Cane*]” in Toomer, *Cane*, 128.

environment, helps Ray to engage experience in this way. Indeed, Ray's sensitivity trumps Jake's, not because it is better but because it is more complex: "Ray felt more"; "his range was wider," and as a result "[l]ife burned in [him] perhaps more intensely than in Jake." To handle this rush of sensations, which were more than "he could distill into active animal living," Ray "felt he had to write" (*HH* 265). Far from a purely intellectual project, writing here emerges as the practice of integrating the chaotic overflow of experience into coherent and vivid events. As such, Ray's literary ambitions mirror the cabaret scene in which "barbaric, burning, savage, clashing, planless colors [. . .] all riot[] together in wonderful harmony": to write is to create a harmonious riot (*HH* 320).

In *Art as Experience* (1934), John Dewey places this paradoxical formulation—a harmonious riot, a refined primitivism—at the center of his aesthetic theory.<sup>45</sup> He begins by rejecting the notion that art signifies a lofty realm of sanctified objects and instead defines aesthetic experience as moments of quickened and intensified perception in which we feel ourselves alive to the sensory world. As such, Dewey recognizes that "art" happens in a number of unexpected places—he lists "the movie, jazzed music, [and] the comic strip" as the "arts which have the most vitality for the average person"—and, like McKay, he sees the sights and sounds of the modern city as occasions for aesthetic engagement.<sup>46</sup> To grasp the contours of the aesthetic, Dewey contends, we would do well to note the "events and scenes" that capture our attention: "the fire-engine rushing by; the machines excavating enormous holes in the earth; the human-fly climbing the

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<sup>45</sup> George Hutchinson's *The Harlem Renaissance in Black and White* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard Univ. Press, 1995) provides a thorough account of the historical connections between pragmatist aesthetics and New Negro fiction. See the first and sixth chapters in particular. Ross Posnock has also argued for the salience of Dewey's aesthetic theory to the interpretation of the artistic debates of the Harlem Renaissance, and he too reads "primitivism" as a way to mark those experiences in which we are "intensely immersed in the present moment of doing." Posnock, *Color and Culture*, 79.

<sup>46</sup> John Dewey, *Art as Experience* [1934] (New York: Perigee Books, 1980), 5-6. Hereafter cited as *AE*.

steeple-side; the men perched high in air on girders, throwing and catching red-hot bolts,” and the “tense grace of the ball-player” that “infects the onlooking crowd” (*AE* 5). Dewey’s catalog resonates with the colorful panoramas of McKay’s novel, and though their particular examples differ, they share a belief that such quotidian moments of intense absorption share something in common with the experiences we valorize as art.

For both, moreover, the connection between street-side reveries and aesthetic encounters goes by the name of the primitive. To illustrate the sensation of feeling intensely (a sensation dramatized by Ray), Dewey borrows an image from anthropology: “when the savage is most alive, he is most observant of the world about him and most taut with energy”; his attention causes him to vibrate with his environment, so that “as he watches what stirs about him, he, too is stirred.” The engaged savage does not separate contemplation and action, and thus “[h]e is as active through his whole being when he looks and listens as when he stalks his quarry or stealthily retreats from a foe” (*AE* 19). In this passage, Dewey takes the qualities of movement and absorption that turn Harlem cabarets into “jungles” and applies them to the experience of seeing and hearing. Hurston, we will recall, danced her savage dance at the New World Cabaret without ever leaving the table. By this model, the goal of art is to lead us into experiences characterized by “the union of sense, need, impulse and action” equally on display in the stalking savage and the sports fan on the edge of his seat (*AE* 25).

Yet in Dewey’s aesthetics no less than in McKay’s fiction, invocations of the primitive do not suggest that we should return to the bush or that non-Western peoples naturally possess an authenticity that we moderns have lost. Rather, the harmonious riots that result from engaged absorption incorporate the fruits of intelligent inquiry to render

the felt impression of an event more complex. This is what separates Ray from Jake: the former's education and reading have attuned him to more elements of his environment, and thus he "respond[s] to sensations that were entirely beyond Jake's comprehension" (*HH* 222). In Dewey's terms, Ray "carr[ies] to new and unprecedented heights that unity of sense and impulse, of brain and eye and ear, that is exemplified in animal life, saturating it with conscious meanings derived from communication and deliberate expression" (*AE* 22-23). He nuances Jake's responsiveness by imbuing it with the import of his wide range of experiences, from Haiti to Howard to Harlem.

It should come as no surprise, then, that when Dewey writes the introduction to a collection of McKay's selected poems (1953), he singles out the poet's ability to wed the sensory and the social in an act of artistic expression. In particular, he praises McKay for capturing with "startling vividness" the "immediately sensitive response to scenes of the world in which the physical and the human blend into an indivisible yet distinctive unity."<sup>47</sup> Dewey names these moments the "common" elements of life, the aspects of experience shared by all those who engage the world with the organs of the body. Ostensibly, he takes this term from one McKay's lines: "And wonder to life's commonplaces clings." But in *Art as Experience*, Dewey had already presented the work of art as that which "keeps alive the power to experience the common world in its fullness" (*AE* 133). In any case, the sentiment—and the diction—seems to have been shared by both philosopher and poet, and it occurs yet again in the opening of *Home to Harlem*'s third section, when Ray has exited the narrative proper and yet lingers in the

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<sup>47</sup> John Dewey, "Introduction to *Selected Poems of Claude McKay*" [1953], *The Later Works, 1925-1953*. Vol. 17: 1885-1953, Miscellaneous Writings, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois Univ. Press, 1990), 59. Though the collection appeared five years after McKay's death, the poet had himself asked Dewey to write the introduction.

voice of the narration. Jake takes a walk in the Bronx, at this point a green getaway from the pavements of the city. He sits on a “mount thick-covered with dandelions” and takes in the natural scene: “Oh the common little things were glorious there under the sun in the tender spring grass,” the narrator remarks, and then he muses on the ways such “physical” scenes gain new significance when blended with “human” experiences.

There are hours, there are days, and nights whose sheer beauty overwhelms us with happiness, that we seek to make even more beautiful by comparing them with rare human contacts. . . . It was a day like this we romped in the grass . . . a night as soft and intimate as this one which we forgot the world and ourselves. . . . Hours of pagan abandon, celebrating ourselves. . . . (*HH* 280)

The passage adds the enjoyments of human contacts to the beauty of the natural world in order to achieve an ecstasy at once primitive (“pagan abandon”) and poetic (the Whitmanian image, “celebrating ourselves”). Once again, the result resonates with Dewey, who values art that “quickens us from the slackness of routine and enables us to forget ourselves by finding ourselves in the delight of experiencing the world about us in its varied qualities and forms” (*AE* 104). The common world, in these passages, marks the mixture of perceptual experience and social tone earlier discussed as the domain of color and the bodily unconscious.

When Ray dreams of translating the “thoughts he felt” and the “impressions that reach him” into patterned words, he claims his ability to feel the “violent coloring of life” as at once a racial and artistic asset (*HH* 227, 228). Voicing a familiar sentiment from the interwar years, he claims that civilization had exhausted itself, that the wisdom of previous centuries had expired, and that he feels “alone, hurt, neglected, cheated, almost naked.” “But he was a savage,” the narration continues, “even though he was a sensitive one, and he did not mind nakedness” (*HH* 226). Jake then surveys a number of

experiments in modernist fiction—the portions of *Ulysses* published in *The Little Review*, Sherwood Anderson’s *Winesburg, Ohio*, Henri Barbusse’s war fiction—and finds an affinity with D. H. Lawrence, whose “reservoir of words too terrible and too terrifying for nice printing” had “fascinated” him (*HH* 227). The image of the reservoir later returns to establish Ray as a writer who might out-Lawrence Lawrence: “[Ray] was a reservoir of that intense emotional energy peculiar to his race,” and as such “[l]ife touched him emotionally in a thousand vivid ways” (*HH* 265). McKay links Ray’s sensitivity, his receptivity to the common things of life, to a way of feeling colored—or rather, of feeling in a colored way. The “dark desires” of Lawrence’s fiction thus resonate with (but pale in comparison to) the “[s]imple, raw emotions” that the novel links to the “primitive” scenes of Harlem (*HH* 338). When art takes up the savage to counter civilization, black writers, McKay suggests, might position themselves as uniquely equipped to lead the charge.

Late in the novel, Ray tries his hand at fashioning words into form, and McKay presents his story as a harmonious riot of color that reconstructs the boundaries of the community. Jake is sick, laid up with what the narrative suggests is a sexually transmitted disease, and as he and a group of friends discuss the pros and cons of a standardized education, Ray recalls a pimp he once knew who proved himself more cultivated than even the most learned gentleman. “I never thought he could feel anything,” Ray remembers, but then an event “so strange and wonderful and awful” changed his mind: “it just lifted me up out of my little straight thoughts into a big whirl where all of life seemed hopelessly tangled and colored without point or purpose” (*HH* 244). Jake asks to hear the tale, and for the entire subsequent chapter, the narrator cedes



control to Ray, who tells his story about Jerco, a pimp who takes his own life after watching his partner (and main woman) suffer a slow death from a work-related illness. Ray presents his narrative with passion, but the point of the chapter is less in the details than in the parallel it creates to the frame story: Jake and the woman each fall ill from sex, but while the woman passes away, Jake emerges after the chapter's conclusion as a healthy man.<sup>48</sup> The colored whirl the story creates—itsself a reformulation of the harmonious riot of colors—absorbs the sensuous energy of Jake's bohemian lifestyle, intensifies it, and, in the process of translating it to text, separates it from actual physical contact. Here we have a model for Ray's art: to translate the pleasures and ecstasies of the Harlem dandy into a literary style charged with erotic power and yet detached from the threats that accompany risky living. The result is a tangle of planless, pointless colors that nonetheless falls into harmony.

Of course, Ray's story does more than burn with a gemlike flame; the tale's intensity works in the service of bringing the audience into contact with other lives and thus adjusting their own sense of self and other. As Dewey maintains, "all art is a process of making the world a different place in which to live," and it accomplishes this grand-sounding goal through small-scale adjustments of perceptual habits.<sup>49</sup> In particular, the modes of attention dramatized in literary works orient readers towards the common world in different ways, not through intellectual argument but through a qualitative engagement with other forms of attunement. Herein lies the social and political function of art, the justification behind the cultural project articulated in Alain

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<sup>48</sup> The narrative in no way treats Jake's full convalescence: he is bedridden when Ray begins his story and perfectly healthy afterwards. No mention of the illness or recovery is made for the rest of the novel.

<sup>49</sup> John Dewey, *Experience and Nature* [1925] (Mineola, NY: Dover, 1958), 363.

Locke's *New Negro* and carried out through so many paintings, plays, novels, and poems in the 1920s: our encounters with artworks from other cultures adjust our impulses and affective habits; they help us to feel the social world with greater sensitivity. Dewey is rather sanguine on this point. "[W]hen we enter into the spirit of Negro or Polynesian art," he contends, "[b]arriers are dissolved and limiting prejudices melt away"; like Felice merging with the colorful crowd, this "insensible melting" occurs at the level of sensory and affective life and thus "enters directly into attitude." To illustrate the process at work here, Dewey "borrow[s] a term from Bergson" and insists that in aesthetic encounters "we install ourselves in modes of apprehending nature that at first are strange to us" (*AE* 334). The process of integration and reorientation does not dissolve or replace "[o]ur own experience" but rather "takes unto itself and weds elements that expand its significance" (*AE* 336). Ray's story, like *Home to Harlem* itself, attempts to make a particular mode of apprehending the world available to readers so that it might be taken up in a reconstruction of the social environment.

Aesthetic experience effects its changes by addressing the elements of life that exist below or beside the level of thought; it deals in sensations and perceptions, affects and attitudes. In McKay, as well as in Larsen, Hurston, and Toomer, this realm of experience is both designated by and accessed through color, and even Dewey turns to chromatic quality when discussing the shifting tones of experience. Situations, he writes, are permeated by shifting affective atmospheres; "they are moving variations, not separate and independent [. . .]" but rather "subtle shadings of a pervading and

developing hue” (AE 37).<sup>50</sup> Like Hurston’s music and Thurman’s Harlem, these qualities are “felt rather than thought.”<sup>51</sup> Yet as we have already seen, the modes of embodied perception activated by color can be used to a variety of ends, some of which are not at all productive of wider, more complex communities. In Denmark, for instance, Helga’s love of color turns against her, and Larsen captures the complicity of the art world in this rebellion through the painter Axel Olsen, whose portrait of Helga presents “some disgusting sensual creature with her features.” The colors are no doubt loud on Olsen’s canvas, and Helga dismisses the work as “[p]ure artistic bosh and conceit” (Q 83). Likewise, when Helga watches the wild and “loose” movements of two black performers at a vaudeville show, she feels betrayed at the exaggerated display of the “delightful manifestations” of race and, like Hurston, feels her color in relation to the “enchanted” white spectators (Q 77).<sup>52</sup> The worlds in which art installs us are not always the worlds that we want.

Helga’s restless movements and her eventual discomfort with every presentation of race she encounters make painfully clear the dangers that attend any public performance of blackness. As such, Larsen’s novel provides us with the critical wariness

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<sup>50</sup> Elsewhere in the same chapter, Dewey describes emotion as a “moving and cementing force. It selects what is congruous and dyes what is selected with its color, thereby giving qualitative unity to materials externally disparate and dissimilar” (AE 42).

<sup>51</sup> John Dewey, “Qualitative Thought,” in *The Later Works, 1925-1953*, Vol. 5: 1931-1932, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois Univ. Press, 1981), 248.

<sup>52</sup> Though Helga is “not amused” at the performers and indeed feels “a fierce hatred for the cavorting Negroes on the stage,” the narrator’s description of the scene sympathizes with the “enchanted spectators”: “And how the singers danced, pounding their thighs, slapping their hands together, twisting their legs, waving their abnormally long arms, throwing their bodies about with a loose ease!” (Q 76). The separation between Helga and the narrator—analogue to the earlier split that occurred as Helga “marveled” and then recoiled at the many hues on display in the cabaret—reveals Larsen’s sense that despite the damaging potential of these mass culture presentations of blackness, there remains a mysterious power in these expressive performances. Soon after the Circus scene, this elusive bundle of feelings is designated as Helga’s sensation of being “‘homesick, not for America, but for Negroes’” (Q 86).

needed to guard against misappropriations of African American writing and harmful representations of raced individuals in the broader sphere of mass culture. But this watchfulness must be paired with a willingness to experiment, to craft affirmative visions of black life, and it is in this regard that Claude McKay's fiction proves especially helpful. McKay captures the grand hope for such artistic innovations in a depiction of the power of a pop song. Throughout much of *Home to Harlem*, an unnamed jazz tune emanates from phonographs and bandstands, and its hook—"Tell me, pa-pa, Ise you' ma-ma"—speaks the voice of a dark-skinned woman calling to her man. In one verse, the singer brags, "Yaller gal can't make you fall" because "Yaller gal ain't got atall," and when a black ensemble performs the song, this bit of color antagonism stirs the musicians: "The black players grinned and swayed and let the music go with all their might. The yellow in the music must have stood out in their imagination like a challenge. [. . .] The dark dancers picked up the refrain and jazzed and shouted with delirious joy." But this frenzy, which emerges as an expression of dark-skinned pride, encompasses the entire audience, and "[t]he handful of yellow dancers in the crowd were even more abandoned to the spirit of the song"; "'White,' 'green,' or 'red' in place of 'yaller' might have likewise touched the same deep-sounding, primitive chord" (*HH* 297). In the harmonious riot of McKay's cabaret, the sounds of jazz fuel a reconstructed primitivism that uses the colors of Harlem's nightlife to celebrate an experience of racial inclusiveness. Racial markings and feelings do not disappear in this "delirious joy," but the rhythms and movement help to promote a "taste" for all kinds of color that enables a reorientation of the social world.

### **Coda: A Night at the Savoy**

As shown in the previous three sections, the feeling of being colorful and colored in the Harlem Renaissance emerged at the intersection of mass culture, ethnography, and pragmatist aesthetics. Writers such as Nella Larsen and Claude McKay engaged the bright hues of the urban landscape to stage a performance of blackness grounded in the perceptual disruptions of material culture and resonant with the portrayals of sensory life and affective experience that occupied anthropologists and philosophers alike. How fortuitous, then, and how tantalizingly suggestive, is the record of a spring night in 1926, when Nella Larsen accompanied Bronislaw Malinowski to the newly-opened Savoy Ballroom, and John Dewey tagged along as chaperone. No detailed account of their evening remains—not even a brief mention in the society pages.<sup>53</sup> But I like to think that in between fox-trots, as they watched the multi-hued spotlights speckle the crowd, the trio remarked on the brilliance of the Savoy's colors. Not only remarked, but *felt* them, and in feeling experienced the active, full-bodied absorption that they explored in their writing.

What did Malinowski feel as he bent his European ballroom steps to match the rhythms of the Charleston? In Trobriand, he had recorded the sensation of sailing in a shallow canoe over the breaking waves as an immersion into the tropical colors of the landscape. The movement over the “intense blue of the sea,” Taussig tells us, allowed Malinowski to “escape—into color—and thereby into another world of the senses” in which the body opens onto the unfolding of the environment (WCS 98). Movement and

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<sup>53</sup> Hutchinson, *In Search of Nella Larsen*, 202. Hutchinson found a reference to this encounter in an undated clipping from *Courier Magazine Section* titled “Those Were the Fabulous Days!” (544 n. 13). He suggests that Larsen was chosen as Malinowski's dance partner either by Harold Jackman or by Eslanda Robeson, who had studied anthropology under Malinowski while at the London School of Economics.

color: add music and you have all the ingredients of the cabaret, all of the sensory qualities that pulsed around the anthropologist as the Savoy's spotlights dazzled his ethnographer's eye. Yet with an urban sophisticate like Nella Larsen as his dancing partner, Malinowski would never have been in danger of thinking himself back in New Guinea. I wonder what Nella thought of the Polish tourist, how she answered his probing questions about life in Harlem. She likely played coy, taking pride in the beautiful lives strutting outside on Lenox Avenue even as she held back, worried at what sorts of portraits this Olsen-ish figure might paint of her. Did she, like Zora, feel her color when she danced with Malinowski? Did she press the anthropologist into faster dance-steps and more frenzied jazzing as the night wore on, as if to pit her ease with the local scene against his outsider awkwardness? And what of the wall-flower philosopher? In 1926, Dewey was in the thick of developing his aesthetic theory, and with the right ears we can hear his night at the Savoy echoing in the "jazzed music" he lists as one of the modern era's most vital arts (*AE* 5). And with the right eyes we might see the paint appear on Dewey's face as he watches the colorful spectacles of the Harlem club scene, an image of the attentive observation he illustrates with the stalking savage (*AE* 19).

Claude McKay could not have been present that night; he spent much of the 1920s and early-1930s in Europe. But we can imagine the zest with which he'd have written the scene. The lights would be bright, the band loud, and the drinks strong; it would be a "scene of blazing color" (*HH* 320). Dewey, a spry sixty-seven-year-old by all accounts, would get up to join the dancing, and he and Malinowski would come back to Harlem the next night decked out in clothes so vivid they would make their wives blush. It makes a lovely snapshot of the cultural and intellectual climate of the Harlem

Renaissance: a novelist, an anthropologist, and a pragmatist philosopher, all melting together in a wonderful riot of color.

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