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Introduction

Colorstruck! Painting, Pigment, Affect

Being There

Form (or figure) can always, from near or far, be referred to an intelligible disposition and can thus, in principle, be dominated by the mind. But colour, in its being-there, appears to challenge any deduction. Like the timbre in music, it appears to challenge, and in fact it undoes it. It is this undoing of the capacity for plot that I should like to call soul. Far from being mystical, it is, rather, material. It gives rise to an aesthetic “before” forms. An aesthetic of material presence which is imponderable.

—Jean-François Lyotard, “Conservation and Colour” (1991)

My reasons for writing a book about color are varied—too miscellaneous to succinctly list. But if I had to identify just *one* catalyst that started me on this journey, it would be my fellow Chicagoan Curtis Mayfield’s 1969 hit song “Choice of Colors,” recorded by his aptly named singing group, the Impressions. I was in high school when this song was released, and I now understand why I was so provoked by it. I was taken aback by its opening lines: “If you had a choice of colors, which one would you choose, my brothers?” Not only was I without an answer—as a budding visual artist, I was in love with the entire spectrum—but Mayfield followed this query with others that, again, underscored the trap of choosing one color over another, whether the preferences were between phenomenological, racial, familial, or political hues. Again, it was 1969, and social divisions were at an all-time high, so this song—addressed to those in the struggle for racial equality and social justice, whom I vaguely perceived myself among—posed, first, a challenge, and then an appeal for deeper knowledge and amity, for both nation proper and the more abstract, utopian notion of *communitas*. Mayfield’s sonorous plea was both intriguing and unnerving, especially for someone who was forming a serious relationship with the world of art, in all of its permutations, contradictions, and effects.¹

I’m certain that it was this song’s unanswerable question about something as banal as color, along with its hopeful yet challenging petition embedded within this chromatic riddle, that were the decades-old seeds that would incubate inside me and eventually take root. After receiving the invitation to deliver the seventy-first annual A. W. Mellon Lectures in the Fine Arts, I unknowingly revived Mayfield’s impressionable song, and perhaps channeling philosopher Lyotard’s sense of color’s uncertain but enduring “being-there” role, I imagined that this topic might be of some interest to an audience.²

What continues to animate me in transforming the six Mellon Lectures into revised and expanded chapters for this book is the universal appeal and power of color. Initially, it sounded rather simplistic and like well-traveled ground: a series of talks about color. But as I began to unpack all the possibilities of what I meant when I referred to color—an artist’s tool and medium of expression; a characteristic or identificatory attribute of something; a heraldic device; mere coverage; a social caste; the insignia that communicates collectivity; a child’s favorite crayon or person’s preferred cosmetic; blood; an embellishment; the results of light passing through a prism; an epidermal mark of difference; Blackness personified,



FIG. 0.1

Kevin Beasley, *Bronx Fitted*, 2015. New Era ® Fitted Yankees caps, bandanas, resin, television mount, diameter 70 inches (177.8 cm), depth 16 inches (40.6 cm). Joyner/Giuffrida Collection.

and so on—I realized I had a multitude of topics in this concept, far too many to fit within a manageable arrangement.

Color was something everyone could “relate to,” and yet its infinite varieties, particularly in the works of artists who traditionally haven’t been thought of as chromatically motivated or interested in art’s more formal dimensions, allowed me to develop a series of interrelated but distinct art narratives. These stories revolved around different colors and artists, the latter of whom, in their visual presentations of particular hues, did more than disaffectedly create pictures using them. Artists employed chroma in ways that, as seen in my above litany of color’s sundry connotations, drew on its various capacities—sensory, symbolic, suggestive, and subliminal—and as a result produced profoundly affecting artworks. I also discovered that unlike other studies that examined the phenomena of color in the visual arts, the artists and cultural contexts I was especially interested in—part of a large and diverse community of makers, interpreters, and human interest providers who defined the African Diaspora and continue to appreciably figure within it—had or currently have affinities with certain colors that were worth investigating. As I will discuss later, these chromatic alliances are conceptually complex,

psychologically impactful, or at times emotionally weighted; they are a compendium of sensations and dynamics that I describe, borrowing an African American colloquialism from the early to mid-twentieth century, as producing the state of being *colorstruck* (a term I will soon explain, and furthermore, will redefine for this study’s purposes). Although still unwieldy and impossible to pinpoint, I was able to reconfigure these chromatic considerations—specifically how the medium and genre of painting utilized assorted modalities of color, or pigment, so as to produce a consequential, deeply rooted unrest in audiences and artists alike—into six public talks, and for this volume, an introductory survey and five book chapters. More fully developed arguments and speculative musings will hopefully meet readers, irrespective of their levels of art historical knowledge, at their particular junctures, vis-à-vis an awareness of color’s constitutional range and utilities, and along the never-ending spectrum of different hues, shades, and interpretative possibilities.

As with many of my research projects, this one originated from several eye-opening encounters with works of art. One of the sightings occurred in 2018, while experiencing a major traveling exhibition, *Solidary & Solitary: The Joyner/Giuffrida Collection of Abstract Art*, at the Nasher Museum of Art at Duke

University. With its focus on abstractions by postwar and contemporary Black artists, *Solidary & Solitary* tested audiences' assumptions about abstract art, and questioned whether the exhibited works provided insights into the racial identities or cultural points of view of the artists. *Bronx Fitted*, a hybrid painting/ assemblage by mixed-media artist Kevin Beasley, introduced an interesting conundrum on the question of an artist's race and creative production, and the wider worlds from which art, especially abstract art, draws its forms and meanings (fig. 0.1). Like prehistoric insects caught in amber and unearthed through erosion and excavation, Beasley's resin-encased New York Yankees baseball caps and bandanas opened my eyes to abstraction's unexpected wonders, where shapes, their repetitions, and colors all work in concert to not only bedazzle but also propose previously unknown genealogies and lineages in life and art.³

Beasley's splayed and colorful baseball caps in *Bronx Fitted* turned popular athletic apparel into a semiabstract floral explosion, similar to how sculptor and printmaker Elizabeth Catlett's *Angela Libre* created an abstraction from the silk-screened, multihued, and replicated "afro"-coiffed head of the intellectual and social activist Angela Davis (fig. 0.2). This pioneering Black modernist's conversation with pop art and that movement's preoccupation with image repetition in mass media are apparent in *Angela Libre*, but there's more than a homage to Andy Warhol's *Marilyn* series here; the primary and secondary colors' interactions with the silver foil create a didactic and vibrating color theory primer from the silhouette and visage of an African American cultural icon.⁴ This brisk volley between an artist's formal maneuvers—largely through color—and artistic elements that can be narrativized

is the basis for what I will be considering here. But it doesn't end with these two examples.

Another work that is relevant to this idea of a chroma/culture merger, but influenced significantly by the medium of painting, is Robert Colescott's *Lightening Lipstick*, a painting I first published and discussed in 1997, yet whose profundity and force I have only just begun to grasp (fig. 0.3). One of the most important figurative painters and social commentators in American art, Colescott nevertheless managed to make paint *the* leading character in much of his work, and *Lightening Lipstick* is no exception. From the large and contorted "Latina" applying lipstick before a countervailing, *Dorian Gray*-like mirror and its "Negrita" reflection on the painting's right side, to the chained Black women on the left side and the Panama hat adorned White overseer at the lower center, *Lightening Lipstick*'s dual emphases on racial self-delusions and the psychosexual tyrannies of slavery were conceived with a predominantly black/red/white/peach palette, proclaiming a painterly existence throughout this geopolitical commentary in brushy, telltale traces. Like Davis's iconic "afro" rendered in primary and secondary colors in Catlett's screen print, Colescott bridged *Lightening Lipstick*'s aforementioned scenes with his own color compendium across the canvas's upper register: a racial "wheel of fortune" where six disembodied heads—each numbered and placed on orange, yellow, green, blue, violet, and red trapezoids—appear to morph from a dark-skinned African to a redheaded, freckle-faced Caucasian, with intermediate racial phenotypes situated in between. Apart from his color wheel's autobiographical allusions (with regard to Colescott's early art lessons and his estranged, racially conflicted Creole family), its conflation of race with color theory is intriguing, reminding viewers that the science of color is never entirely separate from a sociology of color, the latter evident in Colescott's depictions of New World racial classifications and hierarchies, the pseudoscientific analyses of skin pigmentation, and their shared, racist underpinnings.⁵

Although separated from one another by chronological intervals of roughly twenty years, *Angela Libre*, *Lightening Lipstick*, and *Bronx Fitted* formed a trio of sorts, each chromatically conscious in their respective presentations, but deploying colors with all the fluctuations and insinuations that the multivalent notion of *pigment* contains, especially its social and racial designations. There seemed to be commentaries in these works not just on sports, social activism, or racism but also on color *itself* and the role of painting—or in the cases of Beasley's assemblage and Catlett's silk screen, the planar and self-contained objects that invited associations with wall-mounted and pigment-laden art—in communicating a time-honored, authoritative statement that invariably reveals the maker's subconscious apperceptions. Despite the separate career trajectories of Beasley, Catlett, and Colescott, and the three, distinct historical moments



FIG. 0.2 Elizabeth Catlett, *Angela Libre*, 1972. Screen print on foil, 23 $\frac{5}{8}$ × 27 $\frac{1}{4}$ inches (60 × 68.8 cm). National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC, NPG.94.132.

during which they each produced their art, the shared results are compelling, the merger of pronounced figural elements with high-impact color combinations imposing cumulative aftereffects, and levying forces—visible and invisible—that are simultaneously jarring and beguiling.

Colorstruck! Painting, Pigment, Affect joins a lengthy roster of art scholarship as well as numerous studies that grapple with the role that color plays in the creations of visual artists and cultural production in general.⁶ While I am indebted to my predecessors, notably those who have mastered the science of color, and are thoroughly conversant in the various theories and philosophical treatises on color perception, the physics of light, color phenomenology, and so on, this book's objectives are different. I am interested in how a subset of modern and contemporary painters use color for expression and communication, and how these chromatic implementations, despite their locus in the

visual languages of ornamentation and formal design, enter into significations and content creation, and induce in some spectators submerged recollections and states of excitability. The linguist and communications theorist Theo van Leeuwen, whose writings on “the language of colour”⁷ and “multimodality” have been instrumental to this project, calls a historical and cultural approach to understanding light-reflective/emanating colors in the visual arts a “social semiotic of colour.” In many respects, *Colorstruck! Painting, Pigment, Affect* is also a social semiotic endeavor, investigating selected painters' palettes, considering the historical and cultural contexts in which these colors unleash their visual magic, and gauging the responses of the perceivers and receivers—including artists—to the redolent hues, shades, and varieties of pigmentation that a corpus of twentieth-century and twenty-first-century paintings employ.⁸



FIG. 0.3

Robert Colescott, *Lightening Lipstick* (detail), 1994. Acrylic on canvas, 90 × 114 inches (228.6 × 289.6 cm). Eskenazi Museum of Art, Indiana University, Bloomington. Museum purchase with funds from Lawrence and Lucienne Glaubinger, Arlene and Harold Schnitzer CARE Foundation, Elisabeth P. Myers Art Acquisition Fund, and Joseph Grenville and Anna Bernice Wells Memorial Fund, 2005.2.

Colorstruck!

The title of this book lists its principal subjects—*painting*, *pigment*, and *affect*—prefaced by a modifying catchphrase—*colorstruck!*—the latter which, as its exclamation point denotes, sets the stage for emphatic or acute discernments surrounding the themes under investigation.

For example, the multiple ways in which the word *painting* is used throughout this book, from expressing the process of applying a liquified substance onto a surface with a brush or other implements, to describing a particular art genre or individual art object produced in the above additive manner, underscores its ontological inconstancy. Similarly, the word *pigment* frequently slides in its usage between depicting an external substance that gives something a particular color when added to it, and innate, color-producing matter within the cells and tissues of animals and plants—two diametrically opposed definitions that nonetheless speak to a coloring agent’s powers to span the spectrum of meaning making, from augmentation to essence. And while the word *affect* is often used as a verb, referring to producing a shape-shifting influence or change on someone or something, in this book it is used as both a verb and noun, the latter of which (in the terminologies of the social sciences and philosophy) refers to an individual’s overwhelming sensations emanating from intense feelings, their expressions of

a deeply held emotion, or a frequently inexplicable psychological attachment triggered by perceived environmental input and/or sensory data. “The power of race,” writes media and communications scholar Amit S. Rai as an addendum to this understanding of affect, “is a gradient that goes from sensation or affectivity to identity or representation,” with this culminating force’s other name being *art* and thus underscoring painting’s pigmented capacities to effectuate.⁹ In other words, *painting*, *pigment*, and *affect* are distinct yet potentially interrelated topics that as already seen in Colescott’s color-dictated commentary in *Lightening Lipstick*, conspired to hurl conceptual salvos at any number of targets, whether historical, pseudoscientific, or personal.

The metaphoric, albeit historically and racially freighted adjective I’m using for these chromatic and catalytic actualizations in works such as *Lightening Lipstick* is *colorstruck*. For those who are more familiar with the suffix *struck* appearing in words like *awestruck*, *dumbstruck*, *moonstruck*,

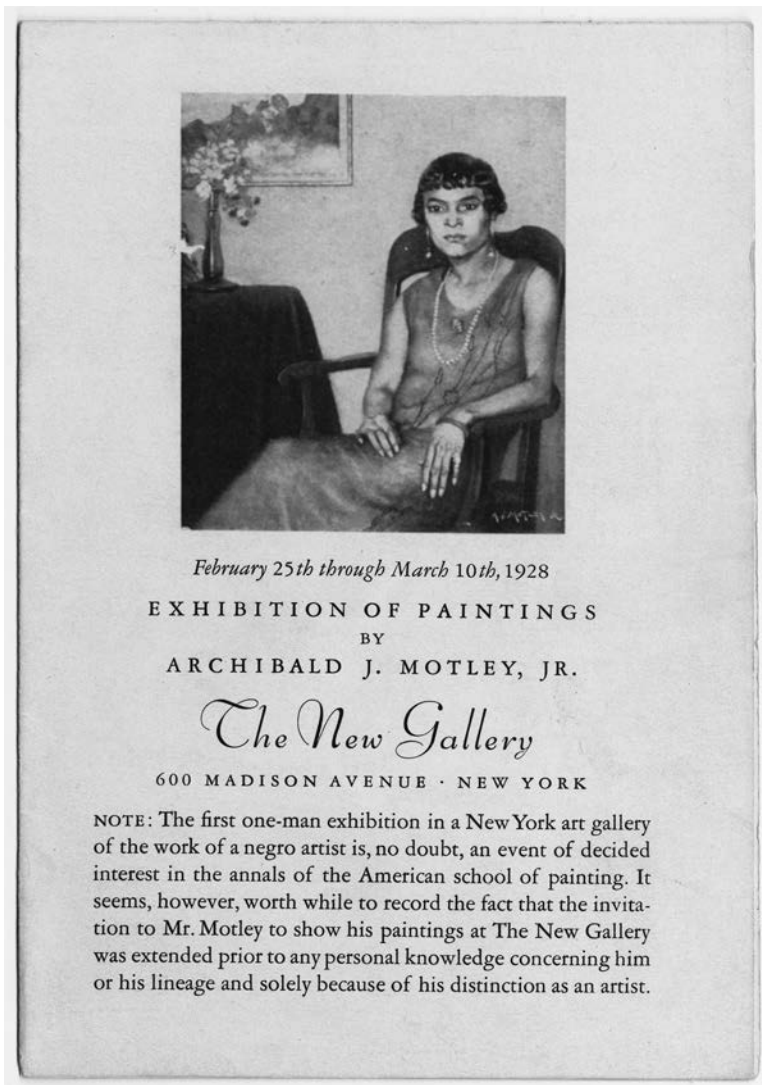


FIG. 0.4 Archibald J. Motley Jr., *A Mulatress*, 1924. Oil on canvas, 34 × 29 inches (86.4 × 73.7 cm). Location unknown. Cover illustration, *The New Gallery, Exhibition of Paintings by Archibald J. Motley, Jr.*, *Exhibition Catalogue* by George S. Hellman (1928). Chicago History Museum.

stagestruck, *starstruck*, *sunstruck*, and *thunderstruck*, the term *colorstruck*, while new to some people, has a history, and shares the same sense of an impactful, breathtaking knock to one's mind, body, and spirit, as the more common *struck*-suffix words convey. *Colorstruck* is defined in Clarence Major's *Juba to Jive: A Dictionary of African American Slang* as an adjective, originally used in the early twentieth century to "refer to a black person who prefers a light-skinned companion."¹⁰ Curiously, among the Harlem Renaissance literati—and I'm thinking in particular about writers Nella Larsen, Wallace Thurman, and Zora Neale Hurston—the meaning mutated, from a Black person who preferred associating with light-skinned Blacks or White people, to anyone inordinately preoccupied with race.

In 1926, Hurston wrote a short play, *Color Struck*, which examined "colorism" among its African American characters. In this play, intraracial discrimination took several forms, whether it was someone who was obsessively drawn to either light- or dark-skinned associates, or someone "stricken" by the vicissitudes of institutional racism or racial prejudice on an interpersonal level.¹¹ Research on this era revealed how the period's visual artists were not shielded from the aesthetic and critical ramifications of being *colorstruck*. Artists Winold Reiss and Archibald J. Motley Jr. discovered that their portraits of dark- and light-skinned women of African ancestry, respectively, would be the subjects of endless speculations (figs. 0.4 and 0.5). These debates were not in response to any technical shortcomings by Reiss and Motley, or perceived failures to accurately render their subjects, but rather were based on their sitters' racial phenotypes, and relatedly, the pervading impressions within these portraits of illegitimacy, social inferiority, licentiousness, and bodily revulsion.¹²

But what if a painter, like early Black modernist William H. Johnson, set aside the more pejorative insinuations in the idea of being *colorstruck*, and instead used the paint medium, an intense color palette, racial Blackness, and most important, his abstracting inclinations to produce an expressionistic, evocative, and disruptive work of art? For example, when Johnson's portraits of friends and family, like *Minnie* (fig. 0.6), were first exhibited in the early 1930s, some critics were shocked by Johnson's visual license and elevation of brown-skinned sitters into worthy subjects of art, comparing the agitated, impasto oil on canvases to a housepainter's drop cloth.¹³ Flash forward some sixty years later to a curator's unexplained decision to take Johnson's magisterial *Nude* out of a major museum survey (fig. 0.7). Racially and erotically brazen, chromatically audacious, and psychologically affecting, perhaps Johnson's *Nude* caused the curator to be *colorstruck*, hit with, on the one hand, the realization of another standard of beauty, and on the other hand, the uncanny sensation of facing something overwhelming, fierce, and intimidating, the painting's



FIG. 0.5

Winold Reiss, *Two Public School Teachers*, 1925. Pastel and tempera on illustration board, 29 × 20 ½ inches (73.7 × 52.1 cm). Fisk University Galleries, Nashville, Gift of the artist (1952.3.2[T]).

cloisonné whites, browns, and primary colors effectively uncontainable.¹⁴ From adjectival modifier to rhetorically moving between a state of being and something actionable (as in “to strike”), this distinction of being *colorstruck*—whether from the vantage point of a viewer, artist, or preemptive quality—performs oppositional, metaphysical, and possibly edifying duties when, as in Johnson’s *Nude*, it is applied to art experiences in which chromatic interactions in paintings and the sociocultural dynamics of race collide in unanticipated ways.

Another way of understanding the condition of being *colorstruck*—and the dual, paint/pigment stratifications and interpretative contours of color—is Lyotard’s theory of *affect*, or an artwork’s constitutive vitality having qualities that are packed with multiple connotations, and yet is immanent within its own purview. Like *colorstruck*, my sense of Lyotard’s theory is manifold, linking his idea of art invariably harboring an excess of associations and meanings with his parallel concept of “the space of the invisible, of the possible”: a Dionysian force that like color, availed itself of the transgressive yet suppressive prerogatives of the unconscious and thus creates affectivity.¹⁵

Johnson’s experiments in paint, pigment, and affectivity were not exclusively his, and one can consider other modern and contemporary paintings that also encapsulated Lyotard’s notion of *affect*, or in this instance an intrinsic, chroma-connected intensity. This particular line of descent into a theoretical investigation of modern color in *all of its affecting and assailing permutations* surely began with trailblazing, Paris-based, African American artist Henry Ossawa Tanner’s early twentieth-century canvases, in which ethereal, blue-green pigments predominated, with his *Daniel in the Lion’s Den* being a classic example (fig. 0.8). Painters before Tanner certainly employed monochromatic strategies to beget special moods, but Tanner’s visual pact with blues and greens, along with his baffling mixtures of paints, solvents, and other unguents worked in tandem with his probing brushstrokes and spectral subjects to depict the unrepresentable and its unsettling denouement.¹⁶ Harlem Renaissance muralist and illustrator Aaron Douglas, although painting in a radically different fashion than Tanner, inherited the elder artist’s belief in color’s expressive aptitude. As seen in Douglas’s *Aspects of Negro Life* murals at the New York Public Library’s Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, specifically the light-mauve-to-deep-purple-hued *The Negro in an African Setting* (fig. 0.9), his layering of art surfaces with monochrome, color-theory-inspired gradations communicated the submerged memories and lived experiences of the jazz age people of the African Diaspora who, even in the depths of the Great Depression, portended a more auspicious future for themselves and their descendants.¹⁷



FIG. 0.6 William H. Johnson, *Minnie*, 1930. Oil on canvas, 17 × 12 1/8 inches (43.2 × 30.8 cm). Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, DC, Gift of the Harmon Foundation, 1967.59.744.

The next generations of African American artists would push the Harlem Renaissance’s ancestorism as well as Tanner’s and Douglas’s chromatics deeper into abstraction and expressionism. After initially working in several disparate styles, Norman Lewis settled on a singular approach to painting, which as evident from *Evening Rendezvous*, was attuned to the allegorical possibilities of color and a calligraphic, informational brushstroke (fig. 0.10). An abstract artist for several decades prior to painting *Evening Rendezvous*, Lewis had perfected oil paint’s expressivity by the early 1960s, masterfully wielding the paintbrush so that its different textures and his autographic ubiquity were not only seen but felt too. Without knowing this painting’s ironic title, Black audiences (and maybe a few White viewers who were conversant in African American realities prior to the civil rights movement’s triumphs) would have intuitively conjured nightmarish pine forests, hooded Klan members, and grisly bonfires from Lewis’s referential palette, sarcastically commented on further by the American flag’s scattershot tricolors.





FIG. 0.7

William H. Johnson, *Nude*, ca. 1939. Oil on burlap, 29 ¾ × 38 ¼ inches (74.3 × 96.5 cm). Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, DC, Gift of the Harmon Foundation, 1967.59.1135.



FIG. 0.8 Henry Ossawa Tanner, *Daniel in the Lion's Den*, ca. 1914–17. Oil on canvas, 41 $\frac{1}{8}$ × 49 $\frac{7}{8}$ inches (104.46 × 126.68 cm). Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Mr. and Mrs. William Preston Harrison Collection (22.6.3).

While Lewis was obliquely referencing the United States' fractious race relations through reminiscent colors and brushstrokes, Bob Thompson was likewise immersed in an expansive palette, but to dissimilar ends. The *Crayola*-hued, human-and-animal couplings within a quasilandscapes in *Allegory* captivate us, but not solely because of their subject matter (fig. 0.11). Rather, we are disarmed because these figures and the entire surface of the painting communicate their dispositions in modes that circumvent the intellect, or audience's expectations for how colors typically relate to one another or are conventionally arranged. Like the early 1960s' free jazz scene in which Thompson was an active participant and contributor, *Allegory's* primal affect—expressed in hirsute textures, accidental patterns, and contrasting colors—blasted the sensibilities of viewers, along with excavating archaic pictorial formulas and paradigms in the process.

What this genealogy of early twentieth-century modern art that privileged color as both media and a racial/cultural citation illustrates is the long and miscellaneous history of painterly affect. This state of being is the by-product of a world in which artists aimed to reconcile their work within what art historian Darby English has described as an all-encompassing and arguably confining “Black Representational Space,” taking on added interpretations and presumptions because of this setting, and aesthetically operating, as demonstrated by the marvel of being *colorstruck*, to rouse, confound, or trigger sensations in the art's conferees.¹⁸ Color's intrinsic role in this affecting art experience isn't just in the domain of the most likely suspects. As also seen in the revolutionary paintings of the mid-twentieth-century Haitian voodooist Hector Hyppolite or the canvases of Loïs Mailou Jones, an

academic painter turned Black arts movement disciple, the dictum from a manifesto penned by AfriCOBRA founder Jeff Donaldson perfectly encapsulates color's utility in this context: “Color that is expressively awesome.”¹⁹ Hyppolite's historical-portrait-cum-voodoo-spirit *Le President Florvil Hyppolite* (fig. 0.12)—the president's coat of arms calling to mind Haitian heraldry and blood—places its subject within a meteoric blast of multicolored flowers, a preamble to Beasley's explosive, floral display in *Bronx Fitted*. And Jones's *Ode to Kinshasa* (fig. 0.13)—an intoxicating fusion of floating lozenges, impromptu Bantu patterning, and all-seeing eye—took Donaldson's directive into an otherworldly, mystical realm. In addition to captioning these two paintings, the phrase “expressively awesome” might well be a retooled synonym for *colorstruck*, and an apt description for what Lyotard wrote of as immanent forces revealed through light and a sentient, quaking environment.

Contemporary examples of this chromatically charged, affecting art, as already shown in Beasley's *Bronx Fitted*, build on the powers of paint through proliferations of auxiliary, image-producing materials, and as articulated by Gilles Deleuze (Lyotard's counterpart in late twentieth-century philosophy), an affectivity that frequently “takes place between compounds of sensation and the aesthetic plane of composition.”²⁰ *Qusuquzah Lounging with Pink + Black Flower* (fig. 0.14), a mixed-media painting by artist Mickalene Thomas, updates and turbocharges Johnson's reclining woman, animating the age-old odalisque motif, not only through contrasting colors and repositioning racial Blackness as desirable, but by transforming the boudoir and its mistress in repose into a planar assembly of colorful, cacophonous cutouts and insets, the presumed lethargic object of the gaze becoming an active agent, collage, and in Deleuze's terminology, “composite sensation.” By reintroducing a 1970s' design aesthetic into her twenty-first-century contemplations of Black female exteriority/interiority, Thomas offers her own angle on being *colorstruck*: an affectivity that extends its pictorial scope “within interlocked frames and joined sections that surround its components; landscapes that have become pure percepts, and characters that have become pure affects.”²¹

As chronologically removed as Thomas's art and the philosophical concepts of Deleuze and Lyotard might seem from the art historical past and its color theories, studies of symbolic form, and style analyses, there's much to be gained for deeper insights into paint, pigment, and affect from revisiting some of the earliest hypotheses surrounding the occurrences as well as implications of color. Sir Isaac Newton, the late seventeenth- to early eighteenth-century English mathematician, physicist, astronomer, and theologian, created a pie diagram or wheel (fig. 0.15) to map the color spectrum he observed while testing the properties of white light projected through a glass prism: a



FIG. 0.9 Aaron Douglas, *Aspects of Negro Life: The Negro in an African Setting*, 1934. Oil on canvas, 72 ¼ × 78 ½ inches (183.5 × 199.4 cm). Art & Artifacts Division, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundation.



FIG. 0.10 Norman Lewis, *Evening Rendezvous*, 1962. Oil on linen, 50 $\frac{1}{4}$ $\times$ 64 $\frac{1}{4}$ inches. Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, DC, museum purchase, 1994.32.

physiological event that, in his words, celebrated the “Phaenomena of Colours.” Newton discovered that light exists in several types of wavelengths, the wavelengths seen by humans originating from the sun and making visible seven colors—red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo, and violet—that when combined create white light. From these seven colors came the visible color spectrum and rainbow. As the colors orange, green, and violet suggested, Newton’s experiments led to the realization that these “secondary” colors are the products of “mixing” primary colors—red and yellow, yellow and blue, and blue and red, respectively. Indigo, however—an intermediate color that Newton situated between blue and violet, and with a relatively narrow wavelength—has often been contested as a legitimate part of his spectrum. It is thought that Newton may have included indigo to have a total of seven colors given that the number was important in universal cyclic patterns and esoteric teachings. Another theory is that Newton was keenly aware of the economic significance of the color, which was derived from dyes made from the *Indigofera* plant, used in textiles for centuries, and at the time of his publication of *Opticks: or, A Treatise of the Reflexions, Refractions, Inflexions and Colours of Light* (1704), one of the major agricultural commodities England cultivated and exported from its West Indian colonies.²²

About a century later, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, a German poet, playwright, novelist, and scientist, published *Theory of Colours*, a book that among its many observations and insights, questioned Newton’s more analytic studies and dismissive attitude toward the role of darkness in the production of color. Because of his background in the arts, Goethe stressed the psychological aspects of color along with its relationship to human emotions and activities. He hoped *Theory of Colours* would assist painters in their specialized endeavors, as painting, Goethe believed, had “the power of producing on a flat surface, a much more perfect visible world than the actual one can be.” Goethe’s investigations led him to develop his own color wheel (fig. 0.16), in which diametrically opposed colors have complementary relationships with each other, and correspondingly, prompt subjective interpretations, and have an emotional impact on human beings. “Experience teaches us that particular colours excite particular states of feeling,” Goethe wrote, introducing the idea that colors are affective and make direct impressions on their receivers.²³

I want to add a third “color wheel,” or rather, a color-coded, bull’s-eye / spike diagram / socioeconomic chart, for consideration before delving deeper into the combined idea of painting/pigment/affect. Prior to his role as one of the foremost advocates in the early to mid-twentieth century for the civil rights and liberties of African Americans, sociologist and historian W.E.B. Du Bois organized *The Exhibit of American Negroes*: a collection of photographs, documents, maps, charts, and educational pamphlets about the



FIG. 0.11 Bob Thompson, *Allegory*, ca. 1960. Oil on canvas, 60 × 71 inches (152.4 × 180.3 cm). Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, George A. Hearn Fund, 1981, 1981.284.



FIG. 0.12 Hector Hyppolite, *Le President Florvil Hyppolite*, ca. 1945–47. Oil and pencil on paperboard, 33 $\frac{13}{16}$ × 27 $\frac{3}{4}$ × 1 $\frac{3}{4}$ inches. Figge Art Museum, Davenport, 92.0013.



FIG. 0.13 Lois Mailou Jones, *Ode to Kinshasa*, 1972. Mixed media on canvas, 48 × 36 inches (121.92 × 91.44 cm). National Museum of Women in the Arts, Washington, DC, Gift of the artist.

status of Black Americans in the thirty-five years since the United States abolished slavery. *The Exhibit of American Negroes* was displayed for much of 1900 at the Exposition Universelle in Paris, France. One of the exhibited informational diagrams or “data-portraits” conceived by Du Bois, titled *Assessed Valuation of All Taxable Property Owned by Georgia Negroes*, was meant to be read centrifugally, beginning with a \$5.4 million valuation of Black-owned land a decade out from the end of slavery, visualized as a circular black core (fig. 0.17). For the subsequent twenty-five years leading up to 1900—divided into five-year increments with correlating yet asymmetrical concentric rings in gray, blue, yellow, white, and red—the assessments for Black landowners increased inconsistently, reaching \$13.4 million at the outer red perimeter of the bull’s-eye.²⁴

Composed approximately a century after Goethe’s color wheel, and based on data apart from the latter and Newton’s experiments with light and color, Du Bois’s *Assessed Valuation* bull’s-eye nevertheless shared with these earlier visualizations a common diagrammatic characteristic—an infinite, self-generative circle—and chromatic template that whether scientifically derived or synthetically generated, gestured toward the abstract and ideational. Like the circular, “afro”-coiffed heads in six colors in Catlett’s *Angela Libre*, Newton’s, Goethe’s, and Du Bois’s color-coded circles fused chromatic theory and societal undercurrents in their conceptualizations, although Du Bois’s *Assessed Valuation* bull’s-eye, via its primary colors along with black, gray, and white, made explicit the idea of African American economic progress. Where Du Bois’s *Assessed Valuation* diverged from its color wheel predecessors was in its self-evident, demarcated sensations: the contrasting colored rings and daggerlike directionals that as they radiate from or encroach on the diagram’s black core, give Du Bois’s synopsis of African American economic development an incontrovertible, affective energy.



FIG. 0.14 Mickalene Thomas, *Qusuquzah Lounging with Pink + Black Flower*, 2016. Rhinestones, acrylic, and oil paint on wood panel, 96 × 120 inches (243.84 × 304.8 cm). Private collection.

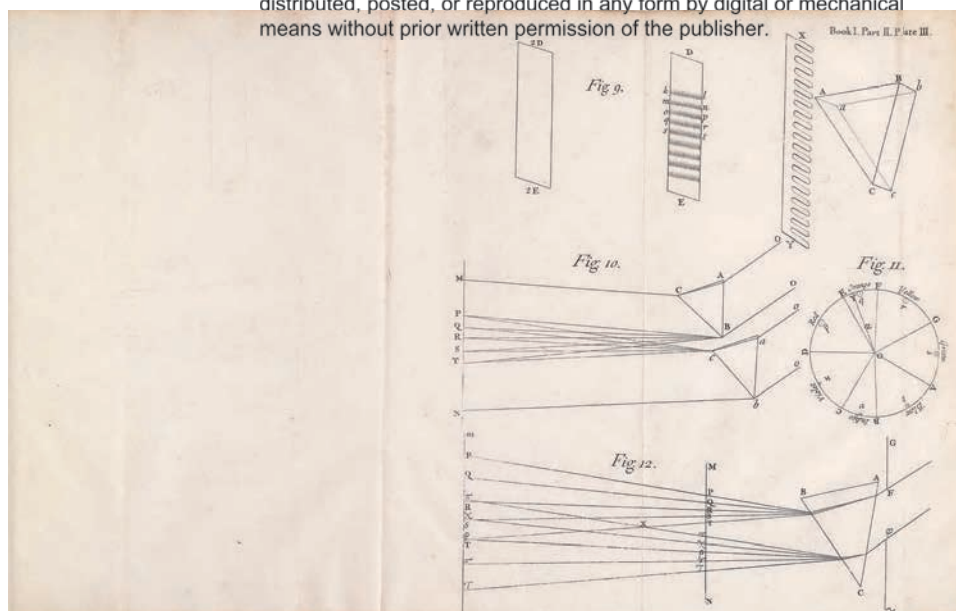


FIG. 0.15 Sir Isaac Newton, from *Opticks: or, A Treatise of the Reflexions, Refractions, Inflexions and Colours of Light* (London, 1704), from book I, part II, proposition VI, problem 2.



FIG. 0.16 Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, from *Theory of Colours*, 1810. Freies Deutsches Hochstift / Frankfurter Goethe-Museum.

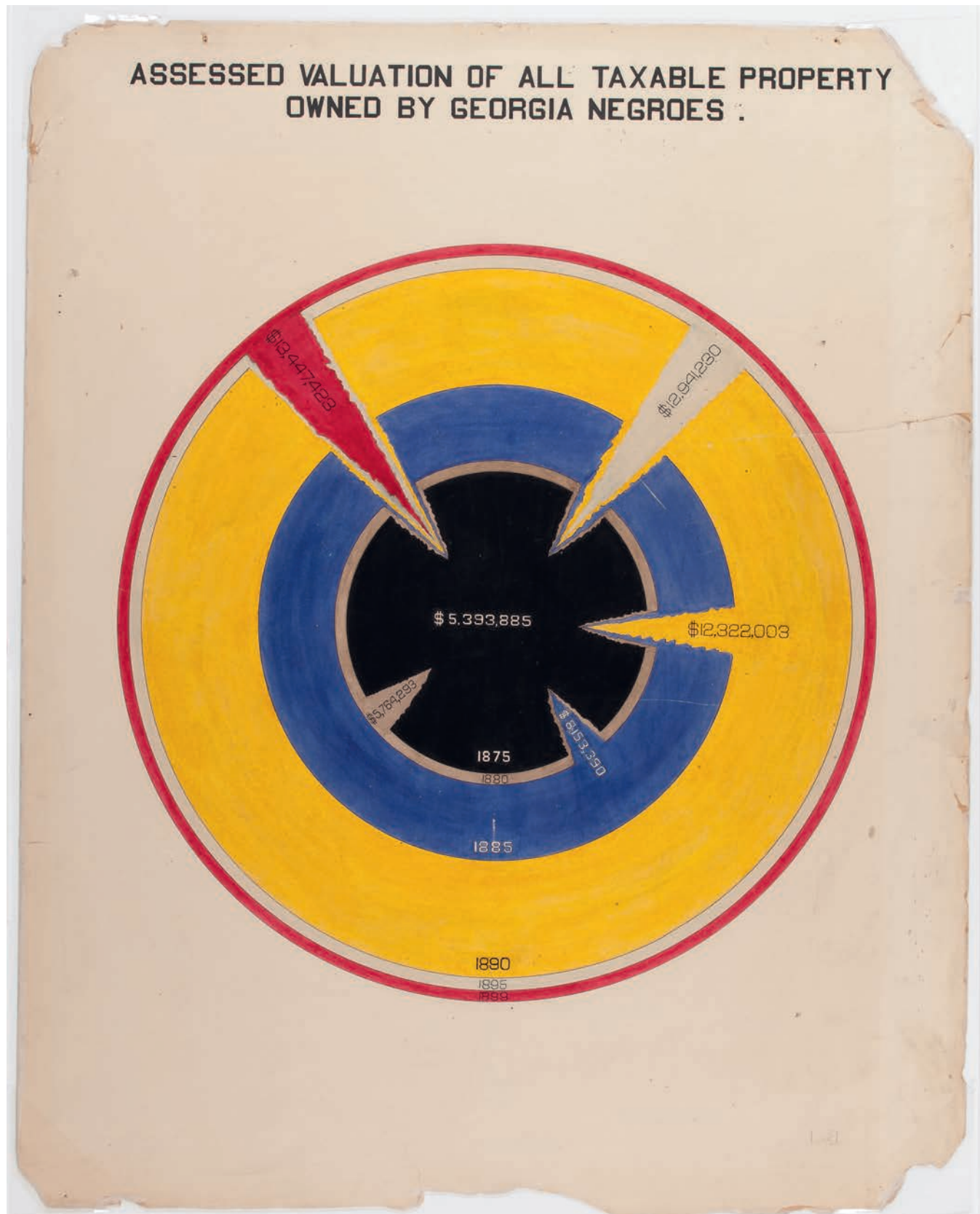


FIG. 0.17 W.E.B. Du Bois, *Assessed Valuation of All Taxable Property Owned by Georgia Negroes*, 1900. Ink and watercolor on paperboard, 27 ¹/₂ × 22 ³/₄ inches (71 × 56 cm). Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, Washington, DC.

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