BOOK REVIEW: Nicholas Gaskill, *Chromographia: American Literature and the Modernization of Color*

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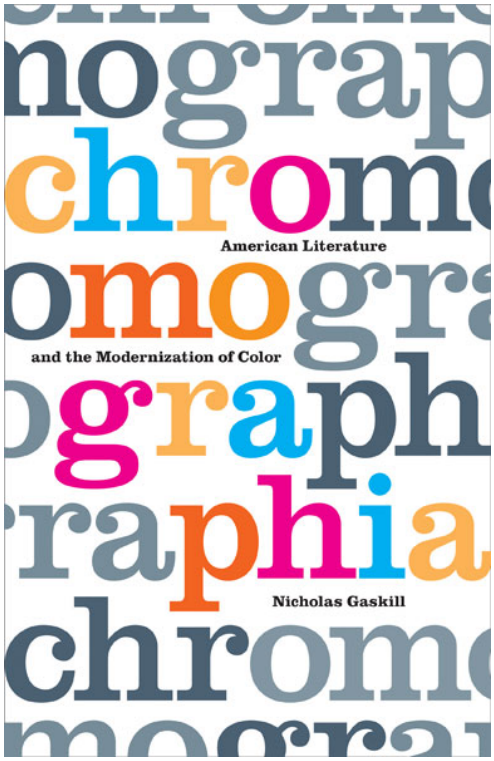


'The chromatic revolution was a sensory revolution'. This claim comes deep into the pages of Nicholas Gaskill's *Chromographia* yet eloquently summarises the project as a whole, revealing the author's primary investment in colour as a phenomenological and philosophical problem that characterised the experience of modernity. For Gaskill, the modernity of colour was found not just in its links to industrial chemistry, mass consumerism and new chromatic media but also in the way colour as a perceptual and sensory experience problematised the relationship between the self and the world. Quoting Wittgenstein, Gaskill affirms that 'colors spur us to philosophize' (p 7), and it is the strategies, applications and stakes of this philosophising that occupy the chapters of *Chromographia.*

While the modest qualifier of the book's title claims it explores 'American Literature and the Modernization of Color', its scope reaches far beyond poetry, prose and criticism, and deftly marshalls arguments and objects from the fields of philosophy, anthropology and art history to forge a compelling history of colour's modernity. Covering the years between 1880 and 1930, which Gaskill characterises as 'the mauve decades' (in reference to the first industrially produced synthetic dye, mauveine), the book offers a new contribution to the growing and vibrant body of scholarship on colour and modernity.

Chromographia intersects productively with the arguments explored in the slew of notable recent publications on colour and modernity, including Sarah Street and Joshua Yumibe's *Chromatic Modernity* (Columbia University Press, 2019), Susan Murray's *Bright Signals* (Duke University

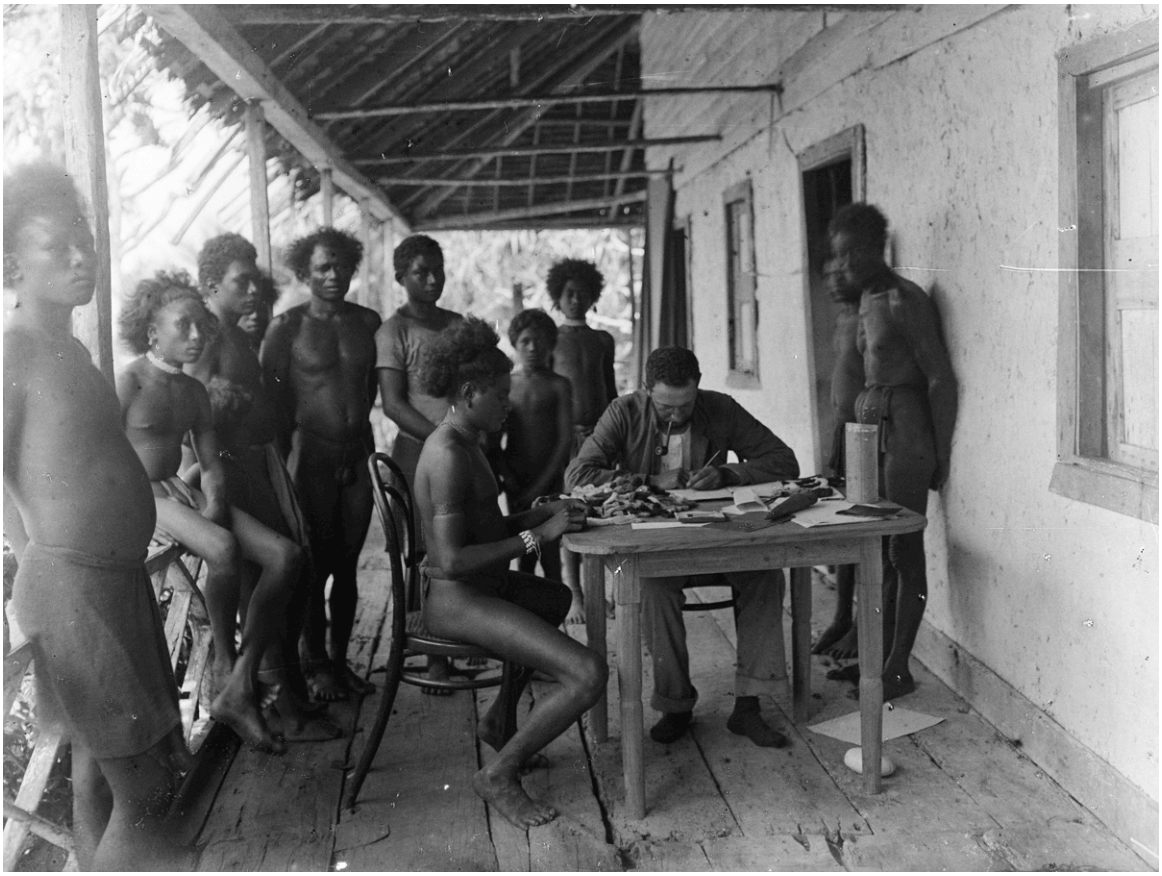
Press, 2018), Laura Anne Kalba's *Color in the Age of Impressionism* (Pennsylvania State University Press, 2017), Lynda Nead's *The Tiger in the Smoke* (Paul Mellon Centre & Yale University Press, 2017), Regina Lee Blaszczyk and Uwe Spiekermann's edited collection *Bright Modernity* (Palgrave MacMillan, 2017), Carolyn L Kane's *Chromatic Algorithms* (University of Chicago Press, 2014), and the catalogue of the 2019 'Color Mania' exhibition at the Fotomuseum Winterthur (Lars Müller publishers, 2019). While these publications have examined colour in relation to film, photography, painting, fashion, television and advertising, Gaskill's turn to textual colour comprises a new contribution to the field.

One of the most effective aspects of *Chromographia* is how it takes familiar milestones from the history of modern colour, such as the invention of synthetic aniline dyes, and reformulates them as critical interventions in the history of literature and poetry. But more than merely exploring how existing arguments about the relationship between colour and modernity might apply to the work of American authors and poets rather than painters and filmmakers, Gaskill crafts a persuasive and original set of arguments, while introducing new methodological frameworks and objects of analysis. The book is perhaps best understood in dialogue with the work on colour in Michael Taussig's *What Color is the Sacred?* (University of Chicago Press, 2009), Natasha Eaton's *Colour, Art and Empire* (IB Tauris, 2013) and Edward Branigan's *Tracking Color in Cinema and Art* (Routledge, 2018), all of which similarly exhibit an interest in the ontological, ethical, anthropological and metaphysical dimensions of colour across a range of media.

In *Chromographia* Gaskill locates the modernity of colour in three principle ideas: first, that colour foregrounded the idea of human experience and psychology as relational rather than fixed; second, that synthetic sources of colour enabled the reformulation of its meanings as they were no longer tied to existing symbolic, colonial and natural histories; and third, that an understanding of and taste for colour, what Gaskill calls 'the color sense', could signal the perceiver as 'primitive' or 'civilised', with the attendant racial, gendered and class-based assumptions carried in these terms. These claims mark the most significant contribution of the book, and anchor colour's modernity not merely in its ubiquity, affordability or its vivid aesthetic but in the very way it problematises and challenges the nature of perception and identity, and particularly in the relationship between perceiver and environment that was completely recalibrated in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Gaskill suggests that literature offers an ideal media through which to examine this phenomenon, operating as 'a borderland between history and philosophy' which also embraces the 'metaphysical', that through its attempts to describe and narrate chromatic experience 'calls attention to the feeler's embeddedness in the world' (p 13).

The book is divided into five chapters spanning 'the mauve decades', and an epilogue that considers the legacies of these debates in the 1930s. Each tackles a different set of authors and

attendant critical problems, foregrounding issues of race and gender throughout. While some colour scholarship takes the rhetorical conflation of colour-as-hue and colour-as-race as a marginal or discreet topic (in some cases the subject is overlooked entirely), in *Chromographia* the way in which racial identity was imbricated with chromatic discourse consistently underpins the central arguments. This is considered primarily through the topic of the 'color sense' that weaves throughout the book, meaning both 'a cultivated talent for seeing and feeling colors' (p 24) linked to intellectual capacity and therefore a 'concept for invoking the distinction between civilized and savage modes of perceiving' (p 30), but also, as deployed by the writers of the Harlem Renaissance, a way of rewriting the relationship between race and colour – what Gaskill identifies as 'a way of feeling [to use the terminology of the time] "colored" figured through a way of feeling colors' (p 221). Gaskill explores the historical and intellectual roots of 'the color sense', beginning with the anthropological findings of the Cambridge expedition to the Torres Strait in 1898, which assessed the colour vision of aboriginal peoples and proposed a direct link with 'civilization' and colour perception that profoundly informed subsequent racialised discourse on colour vision.



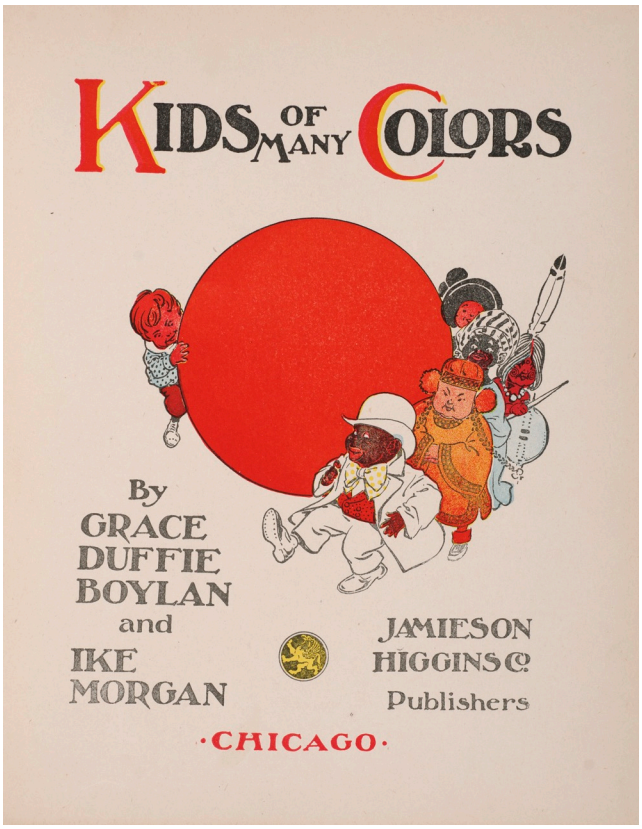
C G Seligman tests colour vision with Frithiof Holmgren's set of coloured wools during the Cambridge expedition to Torres Strait. Hula, Central District, British New Guinea, 1898. CUMAA Papua CD 252, Figure 6.4, p 144–P.2059.ACH1, ref no N.34989.ACH2, courtesy of the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, University of Cambridge

The first chapter, titled 'The Place of Perception: Local Color's Colors', explores the work of regionalist writer Hamlin Garland and considers how the translation of the term 'local color' from art criticism into literature revealed a shifting understanding of the relationship between observer and observed. What Gaskill describes as Garland's mode of 'connecting to location through perception' and his interest in 'perceptual experience' (p 77) cultivates a framework that informs the subsequent chapters, where the social and political stakes of such embodied, perceptual experiences are interrogated further.

In the second chapter, 'Charlotte Perkins Gilman and the Uses of Abstraction', Gaskill focuses on this author best known for her novel *The Yellow Wallpaper* (1892). This chapter considers the idea of colour perception as a moral and civilising practice; one particularly important to the political and social role of women in the Progressive Era when, in Gaskill's terms, 'how one saw color… expressed the sort of person one was' (p 82). As psychology increasingly framed colour as a subjective practice, the capacity to perceive and feel colour positioned the observer within 'hierarchies of race and sex, expressed as a matter of nervous organization' (p 84). Gaskill demonstrates how, as ethnographers and anthropologists such as W H R Rivers formulated racialised theories about the colour perception of non-white races, an individual's receptiveness and sensitivity to colour became an index of civilisation, intelligence and refinement. Charting Gilman's interest in colour abstraction, Gaskill therefore interrogates the intersection of Gilman's feminist and (problematic) racial politics with her interest in chromatism, demonstrating how 'color offered her an aesthetic tool capable of picturing the social conditions that, in her words, reduced women to a station more "primitive" than that of men' (p 90). Gilman's interest in how color 'focused attention on the dynamic relation between people and the environment' (p 39) is further explored through the subject of interior design and design reform, placing her writing in dialogue with the visual world in which it existed.

The third chapter, 'The Production and Consumption of a Child's View of Color', elaborates upon the notion of 'the color sense'. Here Gaskill considers how the predilection for bright and vivid colours exhibited by children, observed by psychologists and educational scientists, was placed in dialogue with the racial theories of ethnographic and anthropological practice outlined in chapter 2. Focusing on children's books, Gaskill considers how these brightly coloured items 'readied white audiences to enjoy a bold aesthetic of bright, lively hues without relinquishing the authority and bodily comportment that attended their whiteness' (p 39). As Gaskill explores, key to the chromatic education of white American children was the ability to develop an appreciation for colour, without falling prey to discourses of unsophisticated chromatic tastes that carried racial connotations and were problematically ascribed to indigenous people of colour and to Black Americans. Gaskill takes up one such publication, *Kids of Many Colors* (1909), written by Grace Duffie Boylan and illustrated by Ike Morgan. As Gaskill notes, the book's cover

encapsulates its didactic and racial strategies, showing a white child who 'peeks over an abstract color patch to gaze on a parade of exotic racial types', demonstrating how colour simultaneously links and divides these children. For the white child, colour is an object of visual fascination held at arm's length, while for the other children it is an embodied presence that marks their otherness (p 144). The chapter also considers these themes of primitivising discourses and colour perception through an extended case study of L Frank Baum's *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* (1900), illustrated by W W Denslow. As Gaskill notes, the book and its colourful images 'instructed… readers in how to indulge a so-called primitive love for bright colors without becoming primitive themselves' (p 39).



An illustration by Ike Morgan in Grace Duffie Boyle and Ike Morgan's *Kids of Many Colors* [1901], Hurst publishers, New York, 1909, unpaginated front matter, courtesy of the Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, Princeton University Library

The next chapter, 'Lurid Realism: Stephen Crane, Gertrude Stein, and the Synthesis of Modernism', focuses intently upon the descriptions of colour by modernist writers that 'thwart literal visualization' (p 164). Rather than aiming to accurately describe the surface appearances of reality, these chromatic descriptions try instead to invoke sensational and emotional responses through colour – the 'perceptual experiences afforded through language alone' (p 166). Gaskill considers how the invention of aniline dyes, which decoupled colour from natural pigment

sources such as plants, precious stones and insects, helped catalyse this form of writing whereby the relationship between colour and experience could be reformulated anew. But again, Gaskill attends to the implications of such a strategy for thinking through the conflated histories of colour and race in America, describing how in the era of the case of Plessy v Ferguson, in which the legal and constitutional justification for racial segregation was upheld, the issue of colour in written and spoken language carried additional gravity. By highlighting the arbitrary nature of colour terms and their meanings, by flagging the possibility that the meanings of colour were not natural or fixed but constructed, artificial and relational, these modernist responses to colour opened up new ways of thinking about skin colour as the ultimate marker of racial identity. In addition to Crane and Stein, the chapter also considers these themes through the writing of the African-American author Charles Waddell Chesnutt and how he tackled what Gaskill terms 'the convoluted relations between color terms and the perception of race' (p 189).

In the final chapter, 'On Feeling Colorful and Colored in the Harlem Renaissance', Gaskill thinks further on the 'entwined aesthetic and political uses of color in modern fiction' (p 41) through the work of Nella Larsen, Carl Van Vechten, Claude McKay and Zora Neale Hurston. The chapter looks at not just the narrative and symbolic functions played by the modern coloured clothing, cars and neon lighting, central to the urban environments and vibrant nightlife of novels such as Larsen's *Quicksand* and McKay's *Home to Harlem* (both published in 1928), but also considers two further crucial implications of colour in these works. First, Gaskill notes how these writers responded to the reductive chromatic vocabulary of race established by eighteenth century taxonomies that restricted racial identities to black, white, red and yellow, by cultivating 'a nuanced, vibrant palette that set skin alongside modern fabrics and synthetic colors to unsettle the supposedly self-evident signs of racial legibility' (p 206). Second, he notes that these writers reformulated the problematic racial implications of the 'color sense' discussed in the book's earlier chapters, and instead explored what Gaskill calls 'a distinctive mode of racial being' whereby 'a way of feeling colors' (p 222) could convey how it felt to be a person of colour at the time. As Gaskill notes, this involved a perilous negotiation of precisely the kind of primitivising and racialised discourses around colour perception and taste that had cemented the links between Blackness and colour in the first place. But through these two strategies – of expanding the chromatic vocabulary of race to enliven African American identity from the essentialising category of 'Black', and by invoking the feeling of colour as a way of conveying the subjectivity of a person of colour – these writers cultivated a newly politicised chromatic vocabulary. For Gaskill, these works ultimately deliver upon 'the political promise of a relational, embodied model of chromatic perception' that has been broadly understood as the marker of colour's modernity (p 206).

This final chapter, like the rest of the book, exhibits the kind of precise, close textual analysis warranted by a subject as slippery and evasive as colour. Similarly, Gaskill's ability to negotiate the challenge of writing vividly and with clarity about colour is one of the book's most compelling qualities. And given that *Chromographia* is largely devoted to textual explorations of chromatic perception, the inclusion of twelve colour plates to help illustrate the arguments is extremely welcome, making the book a dazzling addition to the growing canon of books on the topic.

Nicholas Gaskill, *Chromographia: American Literature and the Modernization of Colour* is published by the University of Minnesota Press, 2018, ISBN 978-1-5179-0349-7 (paper), ISBN 978-1-5179-0348-0 (cloth), 320 pp, 30 b&w photos, 2 colour plates

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