




Michael Taussig

WHAT COLOR IS THE SACRED?

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Part One

INTO the image

Michael Taussig is professor of anthropology at Columbia University. He is the author of numerous books, including *My Cocaine Museum* and *Walter Benjamin's Grave*, also published by the University of Chicago Press.

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the face of WORLD HISTORY

So far, all that has given colour to existence still lacks a history.

NIETZSCHE, *The Gay Science*



"Men in a state of nature," wrote Goethe in his book on color, "uncivilized nations and children, have a great fondness for colours in their utmost brightness." The same applied to "uneducated people" and southern Europeans, especially the women with their bright-colored bodices and ribbons. He recalled a German mercenary returned from America who had painted his face with vivid colors in the manner of the Indians, the effect of which "was not disagreeable." On the other hand, in northern Europe at the time in which he wrote in the early nineteenth century, people of refinement had a disinclination to colors, women wearing white, the men, black. And not only in dress. When it came to what he called "pathological colours," Goethe wrote that people of refinement avoid vivid colors in the objects around them and seem inclined to banish vivid colors from their presence altogether.¹ It is as if there are two presences glowering at each other, shifting uncomfortably from one foot to the other. It is as much a body

thing, a presence thing, as conscious intellection. One "presence" is people of refinement. The other is vivid color.

As for our German mercenary, I see him in my mind's eye, promenading through the streets fresh from God knows what violence out there in America, with wild Indians, half-breeds, and crazed Europeans trading furs for whisky along with rings and mirrors, brightly colored great coats trimmed with lace, and, of course, paints for face and body, as much for the corpse as for the living. How many beaver hats bobbing up and down the wintry main street and hanging on the hat stands in the coffee shops in Frankfurt are owing to his efforts? And here he is with his Indian face, perhaps one half yellow, the other vermilion, asymmetrically joined, the face of world history. The "rarest, most precious colors have always been imported from exotic places," write two experts on dyes and pigments, Francois Delamare and Bernard Guineau.²

Not only kids, primitives, and southern women love bright colors—war does too. Could there be a connection? And even if brightly colored uniforms have given way to today's camouflage, you have to wonder whether camouflage is not, in its own right, a play in vivid color as well as a fashion statement for the warring class. Look at them at headquarters far from the front dressed neatly in their uniforms, staring into computer screens and about as inconspicuous as one of their humvees. It's as if the designers responsible for army gear had not been able to let go of the swirling jungle motif, allowing the ghost of Vietnam to return, this time to the desert sands no less than to the slums and highways of Baghdad, once the center of the world's indigo trade. The generals look good in camouflage, too, even though they never get close to anything more dangerous than Fox news. But the medals come colored.

French soldiers hung on the longest. Beginning his "storm of steel" in 1915 near the village of Orainville in Champagne, the German soldier Ernst Junger saw them dead and red in the sugar-beet fields lit by moonlight.³ They wore bright red pants well into the First World War, when it was suggested that their appalling losses might be reduced if they decolored, a fate that was, according to Goethe, Europe's lot for many a year, "women wearing white, the men, black." Yet Goethe's primitives are engraved in the European image of what warriors should be.

Wandering through the darkened streets of Paris one night in 1916, about the time the Frenchmen were losing their red trousers, the narrator in Marcel Proust's *In Search of Lost Time* happened across a gay friend, the Baron Charlus,

surreptitiously eyeing the passing troops. The narrator thought the marvelous display of color must have been similar to the passing of the troops in Napoleon's time exactly one hundred years before in the same place: "the Africans in their red divided skirts, the Indians in their white turbans were enough to transform for me this Paris through which I was walking into a whole imaginary exotic city, an oriental scene."⁴ By African, he meant the Berbers from Algeria known as *zouaves*, one of whom was painted in blue, orange, yellow, and black by Vincent van Gogh in Arles in 1888 using oils so as to heighten what he called "the savage combination of incongruous tones," the *zouaves* being French infantrymen famous, so it is said, for their brilliant uniform and quick-spirited drill.⁵

That they go together, these quick spirits and brilliant colors, should not be lost on us. Isidore of Seville, the savants' savant, said in the seventh century AD that color and heat were the same since colors came from fire or sunlight and because the words for them were fundamentally the same, *calor* and *color*. Etymology like this is hardly a science, but he was onto something important, same as the famous connection between *color* and the *quick-spirited drill* of the Berbers incorporated into the colonial army. And note that in his *Etymologiae* Isidore of Seville did not say light, but sunlight, light that comes from the biggest fire of all, the one that gives without receiving.

Talking to Primo Levi, famous for his memoir of Auschwitz, the American novelist Philip Roth suggested that his imprisonment was in some sense a gift. Levi replied: "A friend of mine, an excellent doctor, told me many years ago: 'Your remembrances of before and after are in black and white; those of Auschwitz and of your travel home are in Technicolor.' He was right. Family, home, factory, these are good things in themselves, but they deprived me of something I still miss: adventure."⁶

Being a chemical engineer, Levi survived because he worked as a slave in the Chemical Komando in the factory set up at Auschwitz by IG Farben, the largest chemical corporation in the world, making everything from toothbrushes to the poison gas used for the final solution. *Farben* means *colors*, and it was the search for dazzling, standardized colors that in the mid-nineteenth century led to the new science of organic chemistry from which emerged a world of commodities beyond even the dreams of Faust, just as it was these same dazzling, standardized colors that gave the final spit and polish to what Karl Marx saw as the spirit-like character of the commodity. The brave new world of artifice created by chemical magic was to Germany what empire was to Britain and France and

eventually, as nature gave way to second nature, came to far surpass that old-fashioned, graspable sense of imperial destinies which Proust and van Gogh so admired with the zouaves. To ask, What color is the sacred? is to ask about these connections and whether we have lost the language that could do that connecting for us: the way the primeval forests and swamps went under to become coal and petroleum, the way that coal gas came to illuminate nineteenth-century cities and excrete a waste product from which first colors and then just about everything else could be made in one mighty imitation of nature. We cannot see that as sacred or enchanting because we have displaced that language of alchemy by that of the chemists. We do not mistake *color* for *calor*.

To equate *calor* with *color* as did Isidore of Seville detaches us from a purely visual approach to vision and makes color the cutting edge of such a shift. Color vision becomes less a retinal and more a total bodily activity to the fairytale extent that in looking at something, we may even pass into the image. Three of my favorite authors relish this power of color: Walter Benjamin, William Burroughs, and Marcel Proust. They see color as something alive, like an animal, and all three expend considerable verbal talent in getting this across: Benjamin concentrating on the child's view of color and colored illustrations in early children's books; Burroughs on drugs, sex, and games with language; Proust on the fullness of involuntary memory transporting one's body to the event by chance recalled. All of which is to say color comes across here as more a presence than a sign, more a force than a code, and more as *calor*, which is why, so I believe, John Ruskin declared in his book *Modern Painters* that "colour is the most sacred element of all visible things."⁷

This or something like it can be experienced acutely in many non-Western societies, as when an anthropologist casually spoke of indigenous Australians as "color mad" (a compliment), and Ticio Escobar writes of the Chamacoco Indians of Paraguay in the 1980s as obsessed with colors, dyeing, as he puts it, the deepest conceptions of their culture. What does he mean by this arresting statement? What could it mean?

Here colors illuminate the backdrop of myths and set the body alight during ceremonies. Colors "force the object to release hidden meanings, meanings that are neither complete nor lasting, to be sure, but that can gesture, ever so obliquely, to truths that remain otherwise concealed."⁸

Escobar has a story.

Clement's niece Elena is a lovely and vivacious fifteen-year-old. Her proud grandfather assures me that she has shamanic gifts and that she will one day be a great *konsaha*. For now she sings, maraca in hand, in accompaniment to her teacher. Since Emiliano, the director of the Spanish TV crew, arrived, Elena has not taken her eyes off him. Her gaze is so direct, so natural that the Spaniard, more curious than uncomfortable, asked her one day: "Why do you stare at me like that?" Elena's dark eyes did not look away from his blue ones. "What is the color of the world to you?" she asked him. "The same as it is for you, of course," he answered. And she then said something to which he had no reply: "And how do you know what the color of the world is to me?"

That night we spoke of the Chamacoco obsession with colors. Emiliano, who remained silent the rest of that day, only commented that Elena's answer had Kantian overtones.⁹

Or listen to Victor Turner who, on the basis of his time among Ndembu-speaking people in central Africa in the 1950s found that their three primary colors, white, black, and red, were "conceived as rivers of power flowing from a common source in God and permeating the whole world of sensory phenomena with their specific qualities." And he went on to say that these colors "are thought to tinge the moral and social life of mankind with their peculiar efficacies."¹⁰

But first he has to clear some ground.

The hypothesis I am putting forward here is that magico-religious ideas of a certain kind were responsible for the selection of the basic color triad and for the assiduity with which its constituent colors were sought or prepared. It is not the rarity of the pigments that makes them prized but the fact that they are prized for magic-religious reasons that makes men overcome all kinds of difficulties to obtain or manufacture them. I could cite much evidence to demonstrate the quite extraordinary lengths to which societies will go to get red or black or white pigments.¹¹

These colors are alive. As *mysteries* they are invoked in the seclusion of cults concerned with death and with the passage from adolescence to adulthood. In

the funerary cult, boys and girls witnessed the priest dig a trench in the form of a cross, evoking sexual intercourse. Along the cross he placed antelope horns containing medicine, and filled the trench with water tinged red from a be-headed fowl, singing, "This is no ordinary river. God made it long ago. It is the river of God." Posing riddles when all three rivers of power, white, black, and red, were finished, the priest sang songs with archaic and bizarre terms.

Shamanic songs the world over often use archaic and bizarre terms. Could we dare think of color the same way? As that which is at odds with the normal, as that which strikes a bizarre note and makes the normal come alive and have transformative power? (Just a thought.)

Certainly color in this description by Turner is sacred, theatrical, and mysterious. What is more, the idea of a color code is inappropriate, a brutal gesture towards containment. Far from being symbols, distinct from their referents, the colors *are* those referents in a deeply organic sense and that is why they are thought of in reference to God no less than to the copulating, procreating, growing, and dying human body. As Turner says after his survey of research by anthropologists on color in several other non-Western societies, including India, a human physiological component is rarely absent from the contexts in which color is used in ritual.

What he means is that color is fundamentally involved in the making of culture from the human body.¹²

This helps me understand why Burroughs is drawn to color as an organic entity, alive and intimately related to the human body. His writing oozes color that serves him as an agent of metamorphosis. In this regard he is similar, it seems to me, to a Ndembu ritualist, tapping into rivers of color, making and remaking culture from bodily fluids and processes except that Burroughs's idea of metamorphosis is sardonic and revolutionary.

Thanks to Victor Turner and his Ndembu friends in the 1950s, our imagination is given some breathing room. To advocate a Ndembu sense or a Benjamin, Burroughs, or Proustian sense of color-sense is not to say color is really this or really that. Instead it is to speculate on some of the implications of the way the West talks about color, what relationship such talk has to world history, and what wonder lies obscured within, such that if we think about color as heat or even as weather that propels you into the image, we might never think the same about thinking itself.

Such attention to the way we talk about color is precisely what Wittgenstein was getting at in his remarks on color and his statement that "Colors spur us to philosophize. Perhaps that explains Goethe's passion for the theory of colours."¹³

Yet Goethe did not go far enough. Not nearly as far as the German soldier who painted his face in the manner of the North American Indians. For while it may appear that people of refinement, unlike "man in a state of nature," are averse to vivid color, the situation both in Goethe's time and in our own seems to me even stranger; that this distaste for vivid color is actually an unstable mix of attraction *and* repulsion, which the face-painted soldier got right. When Walter Benjamin, Marcel Proust, and William Burroughs bring out the fact that even in the West color is a whole lot more than hue, that color is not secondary to form, that it is not an overlay draped like a skin over a shape—they are not saying that "man in a state of nature" has gotten this right and we in the West are nonsensuous creatures who are frightened of passions and the body. To the contrary, it is the combustible mix of attraction and repulsion towards color that brings out its sacred qualities which, as Goethe's face-painted mercenary suggests, owe more than a little to the Western experience of colonization as colored Otherness.

LICENSED TRANSGRESSION



How do you begin to explain a reaction as visceral as the one Goethe pointed to regarding vivid colors?

First of all let us note to what sort of colored matter Goethe refers—not the glorious sunset or the moody sky, but clothing, household interiors, and at least some of the objects in one’s immediate vicinity. The aversion is dramatic and forceful. “People of refinement,” as Goethe called them, “seem inclined to banish them altogether from their presence.”¹

Some nerve is certainly being touched here. Surely aversion to this degree implies stamping down desire which, faced with repression, means fear, masked as an issue of taste. And just as surely it is on account of this see-sawing ambivalence that my New York City friends *wish* to disagree with Goethe’s “darkness at noon” thesis and, what is more, *can* disagree, because vivid color is in fact let through the toll gates of the West—in stops and starts, in spurts and florescence of licensed transgression.

Clearly my friends are disconcerted. Especially if I am wearing my magenta silk shirt from Calcutta. They question how long this banishment of the vivid has existed and they question what I see as its uninterrupted existence over centuries. They find religious reasons such as the Reformation to explain it away. They find a scarlet cardinal's uniform in early modern Florence or a brightly colored plate for sale in the gift store of the Museum of Modern Art in New York. I look around the seminar room where the cardinal's gorgeous red is raised to disprove the "darkness in Europe" theme. Yet everyone—but everyone—around the seminar table is dressed exactly as Goethe said was the approved color for "people of refinement." I look around the hotel bar in Midtown Manhattan, where my friend brings up the colored glass for sale around the corner at the MOMA. All around us dark blue suits, grey pants, muted colors, men and women pretty much the same, and much the same as it is in upstate New York, or Sydney or London or Berlin or Bogota, Colombia—places I get to quite often—but not necessarily the same on the subway ride to Brooklyn, where an African American man sits unperturbed in the elegance of the vivid color he wears.

Or take the philosopher's wife, scandalized by color—as described for us by Virginia Woolf in her essay "Old Bloomsbury":

The Post-Impressionist movement had cast—not its shadow—but its bunch of variegated lights upon us. We bought poinsettias made of scarlet plush; we made dresses of printed cotton that is especially loved by negroes; we dressed ourselves up as Gauguin pictures and careered around Crosby Hall [at the Ball for the second post-Impressionist Exhibition of 1912]. Mrs. Whitehead was scandalized.²

Not its shadow but its variegated lights.

Virginia Woolf went further with this licensed transgression. She built it into her being and into her prose, as when she distinguished between the critical and the imaginative powers displayed by men like her father, and to a large extent all the men, straight and gay, of Oxbridge and Bloomsbury. They lacked imagination—indeed they were crippled emotionally. "That type is like a steel engraving," she wrote, especially as regards her father, "without colour, or warmth, or body; but with an infinity of precise clear lines."

As for color, it was like a magical substance alive and flowing and human-bodied even if merely expressed in words. It was the idea, of color. It was the

presence, of color—as when she wrote her sister Vanessa in 1938 about the Isle of Skye in Scotland: “One should be a painter. As a writer I feel the beauty, which is almost entirely colour, very subtle, very changeable, running over my pen, as if you poured a large jug of champagne over a hair-pin.”³

The aversion to which Goethe refers us concerns things intimate to the person, to the body and the immediate surroundings. Unlike the glorious sunset or the moody sky, these are manmade things that express our personhood and, as with the drapes and tablecloth and furnishings in our bedroom and living room, are precious manmade mini-environments in which our soul is put to rest and refreshed. Together with the body-as-draped this environment encircling us “people of refinement” is what we might call the “color danger zone,” where exquisite care has to be exercised as regards what otherwise comes across as the polluting and transgressive quality of bright color. A vividly colored tie is okay when the man is wearing a grey or dark suit, but if it’s the other way around, watch out! (Imagine a bright yellow suit with a black tie.) A brightly colored Gauguin on the dentist’s off-white waiting room is what you expect. But dare the other way around!

Yet this tiptoeing around the perimeter of the color danger zone is achieved effortlessly, lost in the everydayness of the maneuver. Is it therefore unconscious? Is that how we should talk about it? Or is it something else quite different, with all the qualities of a reflex, a question of “taste,” we say when we can’t think of anything better, taste endlessly repeated, handed down from generation to generation regardless of other dramatic changes in fashion, that handmaiden of the market ever bound to novelty? Such chromophobia speaks to a deep-seated bodily response whose dictates we blindly follow as second nature.⁴ To call it *habit* is fine so long as we appreciate, as did the French ethnologist, Marcel Mauss, that what he called *techniques of the body*, including ways of walking, handling a shovel, swimming, love-making, sleeping, defecating, sensitivity to hot and cold, and laughing, are as much body as mind, privileged yet everyday activities in which what we call culture—a largely unconscious force—both manifests and maintains itself. Habits come and go, maybe, but are pretty resistant to change. To confront a habit such as chromophobia, extending maybe over a millennium, despite fundamental social, political, technological, and economic changes over that time, is to confront a very special habit indeed.

COLOR AND SLAVERY



One of the strangest ideas to come out of the colonial exploitation of Africa was "the fetish," a European makeshift word meant to grasp the essence of African spirituality as the worship of objects. The Portuguese slavers and traders of the fifteenth century, who invented the concept of the fetish, saw African rites concerned with trees, stones, waterfalls, thunder, figurines, charms hung on the body, charms hung in one's house, objects used for divination, and their many, many, medicines, this way—as fetishes, literally meaning *thing made* in the relevant European genealogy. Behind this label lay the Portuguese, or should we say the Christian, question: how could these people from whom they wanted slaves not see that these things were natural or made by men's hands and hence were not to be worshipped, an attitude reserved for God? Centuries later Karl Marx went so far as to say that the things we buy and sell on the market, things that we make or take from nature, have a lot in common with this fetish power.

and Sigmund Freud drew attention to the visual conjuring tricks associated with sexual fetishism in the West whereby an object, famously a shoe or a corset worn by a man, garners its fantastic erotic charge from the way it both reveals and conceals the fact that women in general and one's mother in particular lack the male organ.

No wonder the fetish reeks with mystery—ours as much as theirs.

But what about color—ours as much as theirs—is it not the great fetish? Is it not a material thing with intense spiritual power? And just like the fetish, which we have hitherto reserved for *objects*, is not color the product of a colonially split world in which “man in a state of nature,” as Goethe would have it, loves vivid color, while the Europeans are fearful of it? Either way, love or fear, we have something spiritual here, something that continues to influence world history.

Let me begin where so many statements on Africa begin—namely with *Heart of Darkness*—considered by many readers as the quintessential statement of colonial hubris and disillusion. Let me begin with its beginning, those sentences that connect transparent washes of light and color with tide and wind.

The day was ending in a serenity of still and exquisite brilliance. The water shone pacifically; the sky without a speck was a benign immensity of unstained light; the very mist of the Essex marshes was like a gauzy and radiant fabric hung from the wooded rises inland, and draping the low shores in diaphanous folds. Only the gloom to the west, brooding over the upper reaches, became more somber every minute, as if angered by the approach of the sun.¹

What is this gauzy and radiant fabric that drapes the low shores in diaphanous folds? Is this not a little overplayed? Could we not simply say, “The sun was setting on the Thames?” So, what is going on with this fiery dousing of the sun? The disembodied voice, the slow, measured rhythm, the almost strange words become stranger like a hen picking up corn seed, words as objects, words as seeds—“Only the gloom to the west, brooding . . .” all this slow winding up, laying in the pieces of a puzzle one by one, all this tantamount to saying something else while taking advantage of the insinuations and echoes that come from saying one thing while meaning another; that this thrusting of fire into water, of light into darkness, concerns at its core Europe and Africa, and that this comes to rest in a thickness, a texture, a substance—as with that gauzy and radiant

fabric from which color emerges as when transparent colors light up the darkening sky.

Goethe's painter friend Runge claimed transparent colors have a close affinity to fire and water and to whatever it is that makes the world anew, flare, and vanish. Contrast this with what he termed *opaque colors*, as when the narrator, known only as Marlow, comments on the European map of Africa circa 1890:

There was a vast amount of red—good to see at any time because one knows some real work is done in there, a deuce of a lot of blue, a little green, smears of orange, and on the East Coast, a purple patch, to show where the jolly pioneers of progress drink the jolly lager-beer. However, I wasn't going into any of these. I was going into the yellow. Dead in the centre.²

It is the destiny of the transparent colors, says Runge, to play like spirits around these opaque colors. It is also their destiny, I might add, to bring out what I can only call the countermagic in Marlow's story.

For when Marlow got to the yellow of the center, what he found was not yellow and certainly not that fullness of a center—as in “dead center.” What he found instead was a stranded Russian sailor dressed in rags, which gave him the astonishing appearance of a harlequin, “as though he had absconded from a troupe of mimes”:

His clothes had been made of some stuff that was brown holland but it was covered with patches all over, with bright patches, blue, red, and yellow,—patches on the back, patches on the front, patches on elbows, on knees, coloured binding around his jacket, scarlet edging at the bottom of his trousers; and the sunshine made him look extremely gay and wonderfully neat withal, because you could see how beautifully all this patching had been done . . . His face was like the autumn sky, overcast one moment, bright the next.³

The harlequin's beautifully stitched motley highlights the crazy patchwork of the colonial map of Africa. But while his body is covered with the colors of the map made bizarrely manifest, his face says something different. It suggests moody opalescent whimsy, a sign that you are going to lose yourself in this tale that, as Conrad strains to inform us, is not a tale with a secret that can be

cracked open (as in his earlier story, "An Outpost of Progress") but is instead a story whose meaning lies "outside, enveloping the tale which brought it out only as a glow brings out a haze, in the likeness of one of these misty halos that sometimes are made visible by the spectral illumination of moonshine."⁴

"What saves us is efficiency," declares Conrad's narrator, Marlow, stuck in the muck of Leopold's Congo. But that thought doesn't last too long. Everything around him screams the opposite. So he breaks down, poor Marlow, another whitey takes it on the chin, leaving him the victim of morose metaphysical despair. He tries to express a big thought, "the fascination of the abomination." But no sooner has he got this out than his voice fails him, leaving it to Conrad to make one of his rare appearances as author, taking up the story: "He broke off. Flames glided in the river, small green flames, red flames, white flames, pursuing, overtaking, joining, crossing each other—then separating slowly or hastily."⁵

Marlow stops midsentence. And what fills the space, what ends the sentence . . . is color. Not just color filling already prepared forms. Not painting by numbers. Not color as a "secondary quality." But raging, ripping, tearing, color, diaphanous and ephemeral.

Green flames, red flames, white flames—pursuing, overtaking, joining, crossing, separating. This is how the "fascination of the abomination" manifests itself. It is also what George Bataille so often tried to express, "to lay out a way of thinking that would measure up to those moments . . . when the very heavens were opening."⁶

Could these flames be trade goods such as brightly colored cotton cloth exchanged for ivory—pursuing, overtaking, joining, and crossing?

Several times Marlow makes mention of a flow not out of but into the heart of darkness. This movement can seem no less self-generating and no less primeval than the mighty river Congo. "Strings of dusty niggers with splay feet arrived and departed; a stream of manufactured goods, rubbishy cottons, beads, and brass wire were sent into the depths of darkness and in return came a precious trickle of ivory."⁷ As in an animated cartoon it seems that the goods move themselves. The colonized become little more than their splayfeet and, by some sort of logical but crazy connection, their feet then become the feet of "rubbishy cottons, beads, and brass wire." The humans disappear. Rubbishy cotton goods walk their way in. Ivory comes out. Who has the greater fetish, you ask, the natives or the Europeans with their ivory cut from the corpses of enormous animals so as to become false teeth, billiard balls, and piano keys? In "An Outpost of Progress,"

a story Conrad wrote two years before *Heart of Darkness*, the storehouse for ivory in the forest station of King Leopold's Congo is referred to by the company as *the fetish*, perhaps, Conrad says, "because of the spirit of civilization it contained."⁸

"I'd rather see it full of bone than full of rags," says one of the white men just arrived from Belgium.⁹

Yet the first thing the two new company officials in this story do to make their house feel like home in the African wilderness is put up red calico curtains, no doubt taken from the supply dropped off by the sardine-box steamer carrying "beads, cotton cloth, red kerchiefs, brass wire, and other trade goods." Otherwise such material is likely to be designated *trash*, as when Marlow in *Heart of Darkness* stands in awe one evening as "a grass shed full of calico, cotton print, beads, and I don't know what else, burst into a blaze so suddenly that you would have thought the earth had opened to let an avenging fire consume all that trash."¹⁰

Rags. Trash. Rubbishy cottons. Calicos. These are what the stranded Russian sailor, the harlequin mesmerized by Kurtz, is wearing, the colors of the map of colonial Africa, set awry. These are the brightly colored, cheap, and dye-fast cotton textiles first imported by the British East India Company into England in the seventeenth century, which, although suppressed by the Calico Acts of 1700 and 1720 because of pressure from wool and silk weavers, could be imported into England *so long as they were destined for export*—as to the colonies in the Caribbean or to Africa, where they played the major part in the African trade, notably the slave trade, and continued to do so well into Conrad's time at the end of the nineteenth century. There was considerable export of Indian "calicoes" to Spain from England, and thence to the Spanish plantations in the New World, as well.¹¹

As for designating this cloth as "trash," Stanley Alpern takes strong exception, seeing such a judgment as a "patronizing myth" because "trash" signifies that Africans had either no taste or no bargaining power and that anything could be dumped on them.¹² Alpern insists that Europeans were forced to offer a wide range of quality goods for slaves, chief of which was so-called Indian Cloth. Moreover, African fashion kept on changing rapidly such that the outfitters of slave ships had to keep a sharp watch on what they carried. Africans were scrupulous in examining the goods, rejecting, for example, cloth that was either dyed or woven in France instead of India.¹³ Hardly "rags."

Perhaps the situation that Conrad writes about was quite different owing to the degree of force that King Leopold could bring to bear with his 19,000 mer-

cenaries recruited from the subject population.¹⁴ Or was Conrad a victim of the prejudice that made bright colors anathema to men of refinement?

During the centuries of the slave trade, there existed a remarkable system of exchange as regards these "rags." Europeans bought slaves in exchange for Indian textiles, such as the famous Guinea Cloth dyed that brilliant, deep, dye-fast Pondicherry indigo from the Coromandel coast of Eastern India. Let one example as provided by Robert Harms suffice: almost 33 percent of the monetary value of the trade goods in the hold of the French slave ship, the *Diligent*, as it set out from Nantes for Whydah on the Slave Coast of West Africa in 1731 was fabric from the east coast of India. Approximately another 33 percent were the 7,050 pounds of cowry shells, a West African form of currency that also came from India, from the Maldivian islands, to be exact. What Europe itself supplied so as to acquire slaves was its brandy (constituting around 25 percent of the goods by value) and its gunpowder and guns (amounting to 14 percent). In addition there were sixteen cases of smoking pipes from Holland and ninety nine bars of Swedish iron.¹⁵ Although at times the role of firearms in this trade must have been tremendous, the manifest of the *Diligent* and other vessels suggest that pride of place from the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries goes to the Indian fabrics, which also served as a form of currency far into the nineteenth century when, in Senegambia, for instance, indigo-dyed Guinea Cloth was used by the French Army to buy provisions and favor in its thrust eastwards across the continent.¹⁶ Like Alpern, Robert Harms emphasizes that "the problem was to pick just the styles and colors that were in demand along the Guinea coast that year."¹⁷

There was an unbelievable variety of colored cotton fabric from India that was used to buy slaves. Here is the beginning of a list in alphabetical order:¹⁸

<i>allejars</i>	usually striped red and white
<i>baffetas</i>	often blue or white
<i>bojutapeaux</i>	striped or checked; deep red, blue and white; blue and red; or flowered
<i>birampot</i>	red, blue, or white
<i>brawls</i>	striped blue and white
<i>caffa</i>	painted cotton, sometimes with floral designs
<i>calawapores</i>	striped, checked, or patterned, with red or blue predominating
<i>calicoes</i>	white, blue, or printed
<i>cannequins</i>	white cloth with red stripe at one end, some dyed blue
<i>chasselas</i>	striped or checked

<i>chelloes</i>	striped or checked, woven with colored threads
<i>cherryderries</i>	brown or blue or white with red or black stripes
<i>chercolees</i>	striped and checked
<i>chintz</i>	printed design, often floral
<i>cushatees</i>	striped blue and white or checked
<i>cuttanees</i>	usually striped and sometimes interspersed with flowers

Their names are beautiful to the English ear, and as astonishing as their seemingly unlimited number. Our language has been buoyed up—*chintz*, *cuttanees*, *chercolees*, *cherryderries*—a whole poetry of color on the tongue, short-circuited through the eye. It was a technical nomenclature, an invigorated trading nomenclature that reflected thread for thread an ancient art and craft of growing cotton, dyeing, and weaving that no European could hope to emulate until well into the nineteenth century. Some names live on, such as *chintz*. Others, such as *calawapores*, have died away, but when you try to say them, when you try to pronounce them, they return as beautiful but alien beings invested with the complexity of vivid color.

Then there were the beads. "The color range was enormous," writes Stanley Alpern, "white, yellow, lemon, orange, red, blue, green, and black, seem to have been favored as solid colors, black and white, yellow and white, red and white, green and yellow, red and yellow, and black and yellow, in combination."¹⁹

The slave trade thus owed much to the color trade linking the chromophilic parts of the globe, such as India with Africa. What's more, color had been used in exchange for slaves by Europeans long before. In early medieval times, slaves from Saxony and Thuringa, Brittany and Wales, England and Slavic Europe, were traded by Europeans for richly colored Byzantine cloth from the east, finely woven in rich brocades and often embroidered with gold and silver thread.²⁰

Color achieved greater conquests than European-instigated violence during the preceding four centuries of the slave trade. The first European slavers, the Portuguese in the fifteenth century, quickly learned that to get slaves they had to trade for slaves with African chiefs and kings, not kidnap them, and they conducted this trade with colored fabrics in lieu of violence.

Furthermore, plenty of the slaves bought with color were put to work in the New World cultivating and processing indigo, the dye which at times in the Caribbean islands and Central America surpassed the monetary importance of

sugar, even in eighteenth-century Haiti, "the pearl of the Antilles," from where it was shipped to France so as to color Napoleon's Grand Armée shipped to Haiti to fight the slave revolt. The slave colony of nearby Martinique supplied *rocou*, a plant native to that island, helping to ensure the profitability of the third leg of the triangular trade from the Caribbean back to Europe. The seeds were ground into a paste, which, when applied to white cloth, made dyes adhere more uniformly than to untreated cloth.²¹

I find it strange that what I tend to recall of European conquests achieved through trade in Africa as much as in North America is the seduction by brandy and firearms, not colors and clothes. I take myself here as evidence of the blind spot the West has in regard to color, which, to the natives of North America and Africa, comes across as no less sizzling than brandy and gunpowder.

This is not to say that color did not set aflame the European eye or soul as well. The French officers commanding the slaving vessel the *Diligent* in 1731, for instance, were on ceremonial occasions gorgeously dressed in a "blue, hip-length, sleeveless jacket over a shirt with lace ruffles on the sleeves; black breeches over crimson silk stockings; buckled shoes with red heels; a white satin scarf; and a black felt hat decorated with plumage."²²

I especially like the red heels. But that is the color shot reserved for the ritual needs of soldiers and state ceremony, much of it based on empire, on primitivist color fantasy such as the scarlet uniforms, brass buttons, ostrich plumes, leopard skins draped over military drums, and the huge black bearskin hats of the British Queen's Coldstream Guards. The officers' bearskin hats have an eagle's feather inserted, colored red. Warrant officers have a cock's feather in theirs, while the lesser ranks have horse hair. Like sex, color is a conflagration to be held in check—restricted to the likes of soldiers striking a wild note of glory and glamour, mimicking the warriors, chiefs, kings, and wild animals of North America, Africa, and India.

Vivid color attracts the Westerner no less than it repulses. It is dangerous stuff—a highly charged fetish substance ready to explode as in that shed Marlow saw in Africa—"a grass shed full of calico, cotton print, beads, and I don't know what else, burst into a blaze so suddenly that you would have thought the earth had opened to let an avenging fire consume all that trash."²³

Of course Marlow is sickened by the terms of trade, the rubbishy cottons being in European monetary terms but a fraction of what the ivory would be sold

for in Europe. Yet it is *the rubbishy character* of the textiles that best expresses this for him and, to tell the truth, this character seems more important to him than the asymmetry of the trade. This is because to him these calicos are like addictive drugs and stand for the easy fix and pathetic superficiality that is attractive to people who, as he sees it, are not practical and efficient like him, carefully navigating his paddle steamer upriver continuously on the lookout for what lies beneath the surface. Color is for sissies.

Not so rivets, however—little marvels of straightforwardness, simplicity, and functionality. A rivet is the antithesis of color.

Strong and functional like a rivet himself, Marlow groans while waiting by the river for rivets to fix his paddle steamer. He waits and waits.

But all that comes is color: "And several times a week a coast caravan came in with trade goods—ghastly glazed calico that made you shudder only to look at it, glass beads value about a penny a quart, confounded spotted handkerchiefs. And no rivets."²⁴

As for *trash*, fast forward to the busy port of Marseilles, early twentieth century, as brought to you by the Jamaican sailor-author Claude McKay in his novel *Banjo*.

Marseilles may be bustling with rivets to spare, but there are many unemployed sailors hanging out there from the Caribbean and Africa, dancing their nights away and in no hurry to set sail. West Indian sailor Malty falls head over heels in love with Latnah. She is hard to place. It seems she speaks Arabic but it is when he first sees her dagger that he feels to its fullest measure how strange and different she is. This was not familiar to "his world, his people, his life. It reminded him of the strange, fierce, fascinating tales he had heard of Oriental strife and daggers dealing swift death."²⁵ Slowly it dawns on him that Latnah is Indian, meaning South Asian Indian, reminding him of the Indian coolies who worked the sugar plantations close to his seaside village. The men wore turbans and loin cloths. The women were weighted down with silver bracelets on their arms, necks, and ankles, their long glossy hair half-covered by cloth that people of African descent called coolie-red. "Perhaps," writes McKay, "they had unconsciously influenced the Negroes to retain their taste for bright color and ornaments that the Protestant missionaries were trying to destroy."²⁶

Bright color indeed. Witness the main character, Banjo, himself, as introduced on the first page, walking along the breakwater in Marseilles, banjo in hand:

He wore a cheap pair of slippers, suitable to the climate, a kind much used by the very poor of Provence. They were an ugly drab-brown color, which, however, was mitigated by the crimson socks and the yellow scarf with its elaborate pattern of black, yellow, and red at both ends, that was knotted around his neck and hung down the front of his blue-jean shirt.²⁷

Banjo falls for the Indian woman, Latnah, and she must feel warmly towards him, too, as we see when she gives him a present, "a pair of pyjamas all bright yellow and blue and black."²⁸

Then there's that morning when he finds himself with no clothes worth showing off—"except for an American silk shirt with blue and mauve stripes, and, jauntily over his ear, a fine bluish felt that the mandolin player had forced on him."²⁹

In fact the mandolin player is but the auditory aspect of color. Or is it the other way around? Certainly here music and color are not only woven each to the other, and to dance, as well, but to song—as when McKay tells us of the West African sailor-musician, Taloufa, singing with "a voluptuous voice, richly colored like the sound of water lapping against a bank."³⁰

What is more, not only *color* comes from India to the descendants of the African slave trade in the Caribbean, but *magic* as well.

Could they be connected, even the same thing?

Following on his suggestion that the Indians had *unconsciously* influenced the Negroes to *retain* their taste for bright colors, McKay describes the *tricks* performed by these Indians in the British West Indies on the occasion of the annual holiday celebrating the emancipation of the African slaves in 1834. Indians performed athletic stunts and sleight-of-hand tricks, such as eating fire and unwinding yards of ribbon from their mouths, a practice that the magician Lee Siegel saw too, when he went to India in the 1980s when magicians would pull yards of brightly colored thread from their mouths.³¹

Some of these Indians were considered by the Negroes as more than sleight-of-hand artists, says McKay. They were priests and sorcerers, capable of manipulating supernatural forces and held to be even more powerful than the Obeah derived from Africa.

Worldwide, I believe, there is a significant connection between conjuring and such supernatural power, as with this self-extraction of yards of brightly colored

cloth from one's mouth. We can imagine the wonder of this—streams of color being hauled out of the bottomless pit of a dark mouth—just like the polymorphous magical substance of the feathers of newborn birds that a Selk'nam shaman is reported as hauling out of his mouth on Isla Grande, Tierra del Fuego.

But the conjuring does not stop there. Not by a long shot. This mouth is worldwide and the colored streams of cloth, too, all the way from the east coast of India to West Africa, the Caribbean, and now here on this page as the image we need, the image we have found, for streams and layers of history come alive as a moment rescued from the flux of time. To read of West Indian Negro sailors in early twentieth century Marseilles remembering the Caribbean through layers of memory sedimented around an Indian woman, to feel the waves of memory radiating out from an erotic and mystical attachment to the bright-colored clothing and silver bracelets, associated with tricks—tricks as in the magic of sleight-of-hand, magic as in sorcery—is to bear witness to just such an awakening of the lost past. Enlivened by the fusion of color with the silver of women and the magic of the sorcerer, this fusion of Africa with India stretches back, "magically," we might say, "mimetically," we might say, to preceding centuries in which African men, women, and children were bought with color itself.