Introduction to the Issue: The Politics of Colour

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This issue of *Frames Cinema Journal* was conceived in the winter of 2019 as a response to the chromatic turn in film and media scholarship that has produced so much exciting recent work. However, in the summer of 2020 "The Politics of Colour" carries an additional resonance that must be addressed here. As the protests in response to George Floyd's murder continue to gather momentum, and the Black Lives Matter campaign has forced an acknowledgment of how anti-blackness and white privilege structure our societies and academic institutions, it is necessary to recognise the intimate connections between the politics of colour-as-hue and the politics of colour-as-race.

This conflation of colour and race has deep historical roots as well as a continued contemporary relevance, particularly in relation to the British Empire. In both material and economic terms colour, slavery, and colonialism were inseparable. The British extraction of pigments and dyes from colonised nations meant that colour was closely tied to imperial violence. One report on the British Indigo industry in the nineteenth century claimed that no quantity of the colour had "reached England without being stained with human blood."[1] The practice of trading enslaved Africans for this dyestuff, and the use of their enforced labour in its cultivation on plantations in the Caribbean and North America, further tightened these ties between colour, racial violence, and colonialism.[2] Epistemology also fused racial and chromatic ideas. European racial taxonomies developed during the Enlightenment reduced the worlds' peoples to a small number of chromatic categories, whether black, white, red, or yellow. Skin colour became increasingly privileged as the primary marker of racial difference and of racial identity. These conflated chromatic and racial categorisations, in Anne Lafont's words "lie at the foundation of the differentiation, comparison, and creation of hierarchies among human beings."[3] Colour and race were therefore also indelibly linked through nomenclature, as colour names were formulated through racialised and imperial thinking, whether artists' pigments such as Indian Yellow or fashion colours like African Brown.[4] The inseparability of chromatic and racial terminology persists today when considering recent debates over problematic colour terms such as "nude."[5]

The imbricated histories of racial identity and colour were inherited by chromatic media emerging in the nineteenth century and continue to shape colour film and television today. These media bear witness to such histories because, in Kara Keeling's terms "anti-black racism inheres in the film apparatus."[6] Film stocks, lighting practices, make-up technologies and laboratory methods are all components in a system conventionally engineered to privilege the correct rendition of whiteness at the cost of darker skin tones. Although each new colour process developed in the twentieth century boasted of an enhanced capacity to render the full spectrum, whiteness typically remained the guarantor of any system's success, distorting how blackness was represented on screen. Writing on the lack of colour processing laboratories in Sub-Saharan Africa a decade ago, John Akomfrah lamented that all the colour film "ever 'exposed' in these countries… has to first make the Homeric journey abroad – usually to Europe – to be 'processed'; other than the lack of immediacy involved in this uneven traffic of images, the absolutely overwhelming and forbidding socio-economic burden this places on cinema as a photochemical enterprise cannot be underestimated."[7] As Akomfrah demonstrates, white Euro-centrism is not only an ideological barrier for black filmmakers, but a systemic obstacle that manifests in the materials, technologies, and chemistry of filmmaking itself, as well as the distribution and control of these resources.

By making whiteness a benchmark against which all colours are measured, chromatic technologies both produce and perpetuate the systems of anti-blackness that are at the centre of today's discussions. Chromatic media therefore present tangible and informative examples of how whiteness is constructed and privileged at the expense of blackness, and are crucial objects for understanding our contemporary moment.

Yet the material basis of colour media is merely one way these images collude in and reproduce racist ideologies. Repeatedly in Britain and America, the subjects chosen to demonstrate, market, and capitalise on colour film technologies were people of colour. Even the briefest survey of landmark films made by American market-leader Technicolor evidences that although whiteness was the structuring principle of colour cinema, people of colour were routinely exploited as part of the system's chromatic appeals: from the Orientalist fantasy used to debut its two-colour system *Toll of the Sea* (1922), and the "Mexican" musical-short that launched its three-strip process *La Cucaracha* (1934), to the notoriously racist feature that secured the firm's market dominance in classical Hollywood (that has come under renewed scrutiny of late) - *Gone with the Wind* (1939). In these films, the racial ideologies that inhere in the apparatus of colour cinema were further articulated through the images carried on the film. These films participated in and reinforced the notion of white supremacy built-into the technology, while also, in the case of *Gone with the Wind*, aestheticising violence against black bodies. By no means was this practice limited to cinema however. That one of the first television shows selected for broadcast when the BBC began colour broadcasting in the 1960s was its *Black and White Minstrel Show*, makes only too clear how overdetermined is this relationship between new chromatic technologies and established racist ideologies.

That the politics of colour-as-hue and the politics of colour-as-race are so closely linked means that scholarship on chromatic media can be an important participant in these urgent conversations about race and racism. While this issue of *Frames* was conceived to explore "The Politics of Colour" in the broadest manner, and race is only one of several political dimensions discussed within, the current moment makes clear that race shall become the most pressing area of inquiry in the field. The anti-racism protests taking place around the world will undoubtedly have a profound impact on the future trajectory of academic work on colour. This seems to be particularly urgent in Britain at a moment when timely calls are being made to acknowledge and interrogate the colonial and imperialist legacies of our visual and material culture. Projects like *Third Text*'s Decolonising Colour forum offer one model for precisely this kind of work, and Priya Jaikumar's work on colour's role in colonial politics and cinematic depictions of India presents another.[8]

Race is one among a number of intersecting political aspects of colour examined in this special issue. The essays collected here consider colour's relationship to identity politics through gender and immigration, interrogate the use of colour in post-war political critiques of consumerism and socialism, as well as colour's place within debates about digital surveillance and data collection. The politics of colour are shown here to be highly contingent, never fixed into a single signifying system but qualified by a host of contextual factors. That these essays present a globalised approach to colour, encompassing the Caribbean, China, North America, as well as Eastern and Western Europe, underscores the diversity of potential meanings in colour's political spectrum.

This slippage in colour's political meanings as it traverses borders (between nations, media, and regimes) is one of the strongest themes to emerge here. The issue of a transnational colour

aesthetic is insightfully explored in Louisa Wei's essay. Considering how the palette of Cantonese Opera was conditioned by its performance in pre-revolutionary Havana, Wei demonstrates how the politics of colour can be qualified by fluid and hybrid identities, and filtered or distorted through memory. Similarly, Sarah Street and Lucia Szemetova's essays, which form an illuminating counterpoint to one another, demonstrate how the conventional associations between bright colours and capitalist consumerism might be subverted to mount political critiques in different national contexts, whether reckoning with the slick advertising culture of sixties Britain or the discontent of post-socialist Hungary.

Both Tamara Tasevska and Lida Zeitlin Wu's essays examine how the migration of colour between media can transform its meanings, considering the shift of colour from installations to moving images, or between spaces both "physical and virtual" in Wu's terms. Wu's focus on chromatic code is a necessary reminder that although digital technologies promise to dematerialise and depoliticise colour by uncoupling it from physical referents and economic networks, this is far from the case. Yu-Lun Sung's contribution similarly considers the political dimensions of digital colour technologies, which do not necessarily disrupt, but can also extend the longer political and ideological biases of cinematic systems. Examining the techniques developed by digital cinematographer's for accurately rendering Asian skin tones, this essay poses urgent questions and presents practical strategies for decentring whiteness as a norm in imaging technologies.

The politics of chromatic technologies are a recurring theme here, examined in Elena Gipponi's essay on small-gauge colour stocks, and Paul Frith and Keith M. Johnston's video essay on laboratory practices. Despite laboratories operating as crucial sites where the aesthetics and politics of colour film are forged, not least because in Akomfrah's terms they helped produce the "'correct exposure truth' which increasingly worked against appropriate black skin tones", these spaces and practices are underrepresented in the scholarship on colour film.[9] This video essay should serve as a new source for future scholarship on the topic, adding to the trove of interviews collected by The British Entertainment History Project.[10]

These essays offer vital contributions to a field of scholarship that is experiencing a dynamic moment of expansion, and readers can find two of the most exciting recent titles covered in our book review section – Giovanna Fossati's edited collection *The Colour Fantastic: Chromatic Worlds of Silent Cinema* (2018); and Sarah Street and Joshua Yumibe's *Chromatic Modernity: Color, Cinema, and Media of the 1920s* (2019). This issue therefore presents a varied but partial account of colour's political significance, offering one contribution to a conversation that is far from complete.

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[1] Report of the indigo commission, 1860, cited in Subhas Bhattacharya, 'The Indigo Revolt of Bengal', *Social Scientist* 5, no. 12 (1977): 13.

[2] On the brutal history of Indigo in particular see Natasha Eaton, *Colour, Art and Empire: Visual Culture and the Nomadism of Representation*, (London: I.B. Tauris, 2013) and Michael T. Taussig, *What Color Is the Sacred?* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009). The legacy of Indigo's relationship to slavery in America is also elegantly explored in Julie Dash's *Daughters of the Dust* (1991).

[3] Anne Lafont, "How Skin Color Became a Racial Marker: Art Historical Perspectives on Race," *Eighteenth Century Studies* 51, no. 1 (Fall 2017): 91.

[4] On the imperial history of Indian Yellow see Jordanna Bailkin, "Making and Breaking the Imperial Palette" in Martin Jay and Sumathi Ramaswamy eds, *Empires of Vision: A Reader* (Durham : Duke University Press Books, 2014), 91-110; on African Brown see Lynda Nead, *The Tiger in the Smoke: Art and*

Culture in Post-War Britain (New Haven: Published for the Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art by Yale University Press, 2017), 130-148.

[5] See the Victoria and Albert Museum's display label for Christian Louboutin's launch of 'The Nudes Collection' http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O1295667/the-nudes-collection-swatch-book-christian-louboutin/

[6] Kara Keeling, *Queer Times, Black Futures* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019), 118

[7] John Akomfrah, 'Digitopia and the Spectres of Diaspora', *Journal of Media Practice* 11, no. 1 (March 2010): 25

[8] http://www.thirdtext.org/decolonising-colour-forum. Priya Jaikumar, *Cinema at the End of Empire: A Politics of Transition in Britain and India* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006); *Where Histories Reside: India as Filmed Space* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2019). Lynda Nead's discussion of "The Question of Colour" in British post-war visual culture presents another useful model for thinking together histories of colour and Empire in Britain: Lynda Nead, *The Tiger in the Smoke: Art and Culture in Post-War Britain* (New Haven: Published for the Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art by Yale University Press, 2017), 127-242.

[9] Akomfrah, 'Digitopia and the Spectres of Diaspora', 23

[10] The BECTU Oral History project contains a number of interviews with laboratory technicians (https://www.uea.ac.uk/film-television-media/research/british-film-and-tv-studies/british-cinema/interviews-a-to-f, and a curated selection of interviews with female laboratory workers can be found at https://historyproject.org.uk/blogs/women-west-london-film-laboratories