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Reviewed by Anna Wells Piotti Castonguay

Abstract

Review of *Color Protocols* by Anna Wells Piotti Castonguay.



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In *Color Protocols: Technologies of Racial Encoding in Chromatic Media* (2025), editors Carolyn Kane and Lida Zeitlin-Wu bring together original essays and republished excerpts to introduce and expand upon the „double-faceted nature“ (p. 2) of color—a

physical entity, scientifically elucidated through terms like “photons” and “chromatic spectrum,” and a socially constructed tool grounded by racial vocabulary and racist discrimination. They posit that color technology and racial practices are one and the same—a series of social protocols made real in context. *Color Protocols* engenders us to grapple with the multiplicity of color, race, and their interweaving. It pushes us to (re)consider how we individually and collectively engage with and through color technologies, such as language, photography, film, and generative AI, through racial practices. In short: Kane and Zeitlin-Wu have published a text just as productive for physicists or chemists, who study color as science, as for humanities and social studies scholars, who study color as cultural.

I teach a college course titled *Beyond the Rainbow: Exploring the Language, Science, Art, and Culture of Color*, which rests upon the same foundations as *Color Protocols*: Color is an interdisciplinary topic, neither neutral nor objective, and our study of it will always be biased and partial. As I teach, I introduce my students to some of the field’s big names: Mathematician Newton, Artist Munsell, Anthropologist Berlin, Linguist Kaye, Bioethicist Obasogie, and by the end of the semester we are examining how racial (and gendered) power and privilege are predicated upon who has studied color, how they categorized hues and humans, and how we continue to make sense of our world through their color standards. I was eager to read *Color Protocols*, to engage with additional color scholars and learn from them. What could these essays offer my students if we explored them together? What might these authors teach us about the grammars, the images, and the algorithms of color?

Kane and Zeitlin-Wu group author essays into three thematic parts: Racial color through linguistic vocabularies, visual standards, and informatic tools. As they progress through these themes, they also move loosely through time, from late 19th century grammars to 20th century images to 21st century algorithms. While the book's focus is the last 150 years and a mostly U.S. context, the editors argue that their text serves as a "conversational catalyst" (p. 12) regarding how social categories, like race, come to be scientifically described and standardized.

The first part, titled *Grammars*, explains how many cultures have come to use visual differences to group humans. Often, these visual differences become linchpins for differences of morality and intelligence—differences of superiority. The essays contained in this section focus on the measurement of these visual differences, the classification of race through "scientific" standards, and the use of that science to justify mistreatment. Scientific color, conflated with race, predicates racism. Authors Frederick Douglass and W. E. B. Du Bois describe the sociocultural, not biological, basis of race and demonstrate how prejudice is not innate, and how we, as „slave[s] of society" (p. 40), continue to perform it. Nicholas Gaskill adds that racial grammars, which categorize humans with color terminology, necessarily employ inexact appellations. Skin tones aren't actually white, black, yellow, or red, but race's colors are a "relational and ecological activity" (p. 82) legitimized by our use of them. Michael Keevak and Michael Rossi explore how racial color becomes data, a delusional process to render race as measureable, classified through visible standards. Finally, Anne Anlin Cheng illustrates how orientalism and ornamentalism have worked together to racialize, fetishize, and commoditize Asian women through aesthetic standards and societal expectations.

The second part, titled *Images*, contends that there are socioeconomic reasons to codify visual media into a globally reproducible standard and that the ensuring color scales and protocols were embraced as neutral design tools to share and replicate color. Yet, discrimination has emanated from them, shared and replicated through their use. This part begins with Aileen Robinson's piece on the use of blackness in theater as misleading, menacing, and magical—positioned in opposition to whiteness, trusted and true, in control of

that blackness. Then Richard Dyer, Lorna Roth, and Ali Feser each discuss the scientific advancement of photography, conceived by and perfected for Whites. This technology was designed to work well for light skin tones, while darker skin (as well as wooden furniture and chocolate) fared poorly. It's not just the tech, Dyer argues, but also the culture of photography—how and from where light is thrown at the subject, which film stock is used, how it is then developed—that was crafted for Whites. They were the standard, Roth adds in their piece on Shirley card standards and the racially encoded decision making that goes into photography, an art form that creates a world that looks good, not necessarily depicting reality. Later, Genevieve Yue introduces readers to the “China Girl,” the Shirley card of film. Feser compares the advent of photography to eugenics, both aiming to create an aesthetically pleasing world for Whites. And then Tina Post's piece on the use of black chroma by Black artists concludes the chapter. Black can be both everything and nothing (p. 279).

The third part, titled Algorithms, includes essays explaining how racial color is also “baked into the very infrastructure” (p. 305) of our newest technologies: the internet, social media, selfies, and generative AI. These technologies emerged from and are formed by societal norms and expectations, and they unapologetically and often covertly turn humans into data under the specious banner of a post-racial world—a misguided techno-utopianism (p. 302). Lisa Nakamura outlines how identities, like race, are performed, contested, and constrained in online spaces. Race and racism do indeed exist online, she emphasizes. And Ruha Benjamin argues that the trope *technology is one step ahead of society* is “not only misleading but incorrect” (p. 335). Society has created the visual technologies (e.g., video surveillance) that depict humans as exotic or invisible, desired or derided. Amber Sweat then blurs the social–technological line even further, exploring how our attention economy has driven unrealistic aesthetic expectations for mixed race babies, whereby #swirl photographs are altered to achieve impossible beauty standards. Similarly, Jianqing Chen's essay focuses on the produced look of Chinese women in their “little-fresh” videos, portraying the naturalness through digital manipulation and Asianness through white supremacist logic—repudiating both the oriental and the ornamental, as discussed by Cheng in part one.

Finally, Quran M. Karriem explains how visual algorithmic systems are more biased than the images they're trained on and imitate. The imbroglio of photographic indexicality and quantitative data science lead to racist outputs (e.g., Generative AI portrays inmates, terrorists, drug dealers as People of Color).

Kane and Zeitlin-Wu's *Color Protocols* successfully contends that the technological, scientific, social, and racial facets of color are not just coincidentally linked, but reliant upon one another through racist ideology. As the text's title asserts, the technology of chromatic media encodes race. Thus, this book situates itself as a bridge for those on one side or the other of color study and encourages readers to explore color critically and interdisciplinarily.

I may be the perfect audience for this collection of essays. I was excited by and understood the necessity of the diversity of perspectives and author identities it contains and was familiar with the wide-ranging jargon (e.g., CMY to CRT). And I don't often encounter texts that put chromatic technologies into conversation with racial encoding—even though this is something I do in my own teaching and research. Thus, I see *Color Protocols* as an important teaching tool going forward and recommend it for those trying to simultaneously navigate the „fraught relationship of color-as-race and color-as-hue” (p. 2) and combat the legacies of marginalization (p. 12) of our chromatic world.