

WASHES AND HUES: READING FOR COLOUR IN MARIE NDIAYE

Shirley Jordan, Queen Mary University of London

Abstract

This article analyses Marie NDiaye's experimentation with colour and colour values and argues that she sets out to unsettle the way we think about colour. For the main part colour – and indeed colour blindness – in the author's work have been explored through scrutiny of her progressively more detailed attentiveness to experiences and perceptions of skin colour in contemporary France. Yet colour is deployed and investigated in numerous different, quite distinctive and often painterly ways in her writing; ways which suggest her interest in other than racialized paradigms and which attune us to questions of colour processing and human cognition, of emotional responses to colour, and of an ethical issue that is perpetually at stake in our engagement with her work, empathy. Through analysis of her colour in selected texts, especially *La Naufragée* (1999), *Rosie Carpe* (2001) and *Autoportrait en vert* (2006) the article explores NDiaye's chromatic experimentation as a lynch pin for asking questions about emotion, memory, the senses, perception, self-perception, creativity and mental disorder. Specific dimensions of the author's colour practice, namely her interest in all-suffusing washes and her declining of hues of a given colour (here yellow and green) are given detailed attention and important painterly and literary intertexts are examined.

Marie NDiaye is a surprising and subtle colourist whose interest lies in human perceptions and experiences of colour. She is known as a writer of skin and accordingly much has been written about the refined palette related to skin colour in her work.¹ Her corpus has been

¹ See for example Claire Ducournau 'Entre noir et blanc: le traitement littéraire de la couleur de peau dans *Rosie Carpe* et *Papa doit manger*', in *Marie NDiaye: l'étrangeté à l'œuvre*, ed.

scanned for its socio-political attention to experiences and perceptions of blackness, for its nuanced gradations of skin pigmentation, for its Fanonesque crises of self-lactification² and for its complex, ironic dynamic of (French) colour blindness including the author's lengthy refusal to engage in discussion of her own blackness.³ On occasion NDiaye furnishes an hallucinatory blackness, inventing protagonists so achromatically black that their colour challenges perception and language and is explored as an almost separate quality, precisely *as* colour, a hyperbolic move which serves to expose obsessions of racial difference: in *Papa doit manger*, Papa describes his own blackness as dazzling, 'un noir ultime, insurpassable [...] miroitant',⁴ while in *Rosie Carpe* the eponymous heroine notes the 'noir profond, insurpassable, miraculeux' of Mr Calmette's skin.⁵ Skin colour in NDiaye persistently alludes to, yet simultaneously resists a postcolonial value system that works via contrasts both stark

by Andrew Asibong and Shirley Jordan (Villeneuve d'Ascq: Presses universitaires du Septentrion, 2009), pp. 101-117.

² For example in *Ladivine* (Paris: Gallimard, 2013) where the protagonist's desire to be 'incolore' (p. 27) drives the novel.

³ On these phenomena see Sarah Burnautzki, 'Jeux de visibilité et d'invisibilité: la production romanesque de Marie NDiaye à la lumière de la crise du républicanisme français' and Lydie Moudileno, 'Marie NDiaye, entre réserve et visibilité', in *Une Femme puissante: l'œuvre de Marie NDiaye*, ed. by Daniel Bengsch and Cornelia Ruhe (Amsterdam and new York: Rodopi, 2013), pp. 141-158 and pp. 159-176 respectively.

⁴ *Papa doit manger* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 2003), p. 11.

⁵ *Rosie Carpe* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 2001), p. 158.

and subtle, aggressively opposing white against black⁶ and pitting against each other variants of brownness.⁷ Colour reference in NDiaye's writing is however not only concerned with the political question of racialized perceptions of skin, or with what Richard Dyer in his classic *White* refers to as 'epidermal fact'.⁸ This article reaches beyond such well-trodden lines of enquiry to pursue alternative palettes and different ways of unsettling colour, most notably ideas of colour washes, hues and the sensations attached to them. It focuses more holistically on colour values in the author's work and traces other facets of the connections that she establishes between colour and ethics.

I shall posit as starting points a number of what I regard to be staple features related to colour values in NDiaye. First, colour is seldom connected to pleasure but tends instead to be a source of unease, doubt, distaste or even disgust. Second, colours are rarely 'true'. While one is occasionally struck by sharp points of unambiguous colour such as the red leather of Valérie's shoes in *La Femme changée en bûche*,⁹ colours more generally strain against fixity: they are hesitant, mutable, cloudy, indistinct or blurred. At once troubled and troubling, they

⁶ For instance in *Papa doit manger* which sets the blackness of Papa against the whiteness of Maman or in the film *White Material* (2009) on which NDiaye collaborated with director Claire Denis.

⁷ As in NDiaye's 'Les Sœurs', in Pap Ndiaye, *La Condition noire: essai sur une minorité française* (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 2008), pp. 9-15.

⁸ Richard Dyer, *White* (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), p. 62.

⁹ Jean-Pierre Richard rightly notes the unequivocal function of these shoes as 'une parfaite figure d'assurance'. See 'Le Trouble et le partage', in *Terrains de lecture* (Paris: Gallimard, 1996), pp. 161-86 (p. 162).

are frequently characterized by adjectives with the (often pejorative) suffix ‘-âtre’, a pronounced writerly tic. Third, NDiaye works to dislodge and destabilize colour, not only prising it free from its habitual associations but also releasing it so that it escapes beyond matter and form. A careful and sparing colourist, she does not automatically provide local colour in the interests of mimetic depiction of the material world and we do not necessarily find colour where we think we will; indeed colour frequently goes unmentioned for lengthy sections of text. The reader embarking, for instance, upon NDiaye’s epic *En famille* need scan only the first few pages to realize that NDiaye is not a writer with paint box at the ready.¹⁰ Fourth, the author’s interest in colour processing suggests an awareness of colour sciences, from the question of how light and surfaces interact to the puzzles in cognitive and neuroscience concerning emotional connections to colour. A final point: for the main part the author uses colour to tell us something about consciousness or about the unconscious mind, seeking to give us access to complicated emotional states. It is not so much the colour of things that we notice but moments where colour floods a protagonist’s consciousness or where a text seems washed in a particular hue. Colour in NDiaye becomes especially interesting when it rushes in, overwhelms and soaks; when it is colour in process, straining to express the complexity of inner worlds and the turbulence of emotion and to make these available to the reader. Colour hues in NDiaye are often un-localised, undiscernible to the eye and yet strongly felt. Ultimately, while colour in NDiaye is an invitation to empathy, it also divides and separates individuals keeping them steeped in private worlds. Accounts of intense experiences and perceptions of colour constitute one of the avenues by which the author sets her protagonists apart from each other, and indeed from us, as she explores the problem of making accessible other minds, consciousness and experiences, especially experiences of suffering or disorder.

¹⁰ *En Famille* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1991).

In *Black and Blue* Carol Mavor connects colour sensations to bruising.¹¹ Taking a cue from Barthes's punctum, she tracks gradations of these colours as evidence of and spur to pain through a range of film, literature and art. For Mavor, colour wounds. In combinations of black and blue she finds a coalescence of memory and touch, insisting on colour as haptic recall of the original bruising impact as well as the residual or imagined tenderness of damaged tissue. NDiaye's highly idiosyncratic colourscapes invite similar readings, closely connected to Mavor's insistent tethering of a subtly restrained palette to pain but shifting away from the chromatic range habitually associated with the body to focus instead on mental and emotional states conveyed by quite other colours. In this article I consider how NDiaye deploys hues of two colours that are especially tenacious in her writing, yellow and green. I also trace connections between her colour experiments and those in two notable intertexts: first the painting of Turner which I shall argue influences the author's distribution of colour well beyond her early attempt to write with his work in *La Naufragée*,¹² and second Charlotte Perkins Gilman's 'The Yellow Wall-Paper'¹³ which bears remarkable similarity to NDiaye's detailed exploration of depressive and disordered mental states via colour.

A radical experiment in writing colour perception, NDiaye's very painterly *La Naufragée* is the first and most significant of three works wherein the author calls us to consider word-image relations and focuses intensively on problems of colour, light, vision

¹¹ Carol Mavor, *Black and Blue* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2012).

¹² Marie NDiaye, *La Naufragée* (Charenton: Flohic Éditions, coll. 'Musées secrets', 1999).

¹³ Charlotte Perkins Gilman, 'The Yellow Wall-Paper', *New England Magazine*, 11 (1892), pp. 647-56.

and visibility.¹⁴ A sustained dialogue with the unconventional nineteenth-century colourist Turner, it is saturated in his work incorporating a total of thirty-seven full-page colour plates. Each left-hand page is taken up with a reproduction of either an entire painting or a detail from a painting, usually depicting a seascape, river or shore, while NDiaye's text occupies the right-hand pages, a distribution which, given the left-to-right direction of reading, suggests that the painting is a spur to the text. In the following analysis I argue that *La Naufragée* constitutes a foundational statement in terms of how NDiaye uses and intends us to read colour and sets in train approaches to colour perception that will endure in her subsequent writing, although somewhat surprisingly the text has not yet been analysed in this perspective.¹⁵

NDiaye's narrative is a fable concerning a hybrid creature, half-woman, half-fish, who is washed up on the banks of the Seine. She is treated brutally by humans who cannot comprehend her and who 'store' her in fresh-water containers rather than returning her to the sea. Ultimately she is purchased by an English painter who is inspired by her mesmerizing song to revolutionize pictorial language by releasing colour and light from form. The tale

¹⁴ The others are *Autoportrait en vert* (with photographs by Julie Ganzin and anon.) (Paris: Mercure de France, coll. 'Traits et portraits', 2005), and *Y penser sans cesse* (with photographs by Denis Cointe) (Paris: L'Arbre vengeur, 2011).

¹⁵ The sole analysis of this book to focus on colour explores the text's aesthetics but without considering how colour connects to ethics or how phenomena such as the dissolution of form in colour or colour's diffuse presence in fog, mist, shadow or trembling light carry over into NDiaye's use of colour elsewhere. See Marinella Termite, 'Les Couleurs de *La Naufragée*', in *Marie NDiaye: l'étrangeté à l'œuvre*, ed. by Andrew Asibong and Shirley Jordan, pp. 53-63.

ends mysteriously: the painter has died and the huge tank is found empty but it is less the destiny of the woman-fish that matters here than NDiaye's engagement with Turner and her fascination with his opening up of colour to fresh scrutiny.

The focalization of *La Naufragée* is split into two giving us access first to the woman-fish then to the painter. Here we are to understand the word 'focalization' in its fullest visual sense as well as in terms of reason and affect since we are asked very literally to *see* the world as the woman-fish sees it and the narrative begins explicitly with the opening and closing of her eyes: 'J'ouvre les yeux puis les referme bien vite, les rouvre, les ferme de nouveau' (p. 7). Thus NDiaye very pointedly refers to vision, bypasses human perception and ushers in a post-human exercise in seeing: how might a creature such as this experience colour? Colour is at once released and relativized. Colour notations are connected to disgust for soft water and scum, to the chromatic confusion induced by the assembled crowd in the food market perceived as 'taches de couleur brutales et fugaces' (p. 25) and synaesthetically to the stridency of human voices which 'strient mon cerveau de lignes rouges' (p. 25). The protagonist perceives 'un halo de blancheur miroitante qui n'est pas la réalité des humains, je le sens bien, qui n'est pas ce que leur montrent leurs yeux mais simplement la façon dont leur monde se découvre à mon regard inadapté' (p. 15). Her awakenings take place at the extremes of emotional distress and at the conjunction of blackness and light: they are a sequence of 'réveils noirs et semblables, dans la même lumière aveuglante' (p. 23). The vision of the woman-fish, with its revolutionary dissolution of forms, is precisely that of Turner. She does not see objects distinctly but perceives atmosphere and light: she ushers in the trembling of perception that will become frequent in NDiaye's protagonists.

I shall now focus briefly on the significance of two images which embody radically different approaches to colour experience and which NDiaye sets in dialogue with each other at the hinge where the narrative of the woman-fish closes and that of the painter begins. The

first, a radically adventurous, almost abstract vortex, captures intense emotion and sensation apparently from within and is aligned with the woman-fish's experience at a dramatic moment of despair. This ball or whirl of orange held within an unusual square composition is an ambitious exercise in painting light and colour which, as is indicated by the abbreviated title used here - *Light and Colour (Goethe's Theory)* -¹⁶ responds quite specifically to Goethe's *Theory of Colours (Zur Farbenlehre)* of 1810. Importantly, Goethe's chief concern was not the physical nature of colour or light but how colour is perceived and processed subjectively by humans, which is why the emphatic moment of eye-opening in the incipit of *La Naufragée*, signalling not that the woman-fish is waking but that she is *seeing*, is so important. The text adjacent to *Light and Colour* refers to the 'masse de lumière palpitante' (p. 41) in which the narrator is caught up as it floods through the glass of her temporary prison in a tank in the Jardin des plantes and harnesses this burst of colour to intense emotion, sensation and pain beyond vision: 'je ne distingue rien, nulle forme, nulle couleur, car je suis dans l'œil même de la clarté, au cœur du cœur du scintillement' (p. 41). Here, there is precisely *no* colour, no viewpoint, no horizon and no direct light source, simply an impression, a raw experience almost as if the eye and the sun were fused. Turner's painting asks us to understand that reality is formed by the viewer instead of being an external vision presented from a distance. Attempting to share the woman-fish's experience of colour and light constitutes for the reader an exercise in proxemics and, connected to this, in empathy. It is significant that the woman-fish's colour-soaked narrative is in the first person, while that of the painter to which we are next asked to attend assumes the more distanced appraisal of a third person and stands back and apart from colour.

¹⁶ The full, somewhat laborious title is *Light and Colour (Goethe's Theory) – The Morning after the Deluge – Moses Writing the Book of Genesis*.

The image which follows *Light and Colour* is aligned with the painter's way of seeing and is one of four details taken from a representational painting which clearly depicts fishermen cleaning and selling their catch.¹⁷ Here colour is distributed conventionally and contained within matter and form. A man with a vivid red hat stands gazing at the silvery fish that spill floundering out of a basket onto the sand and our perspective is shifted at once from how the woman-fish sees to how she is seen. The very deliberate distinction between colour values in this and the previous image may be read as a consolidation of emerging experiments with colour in NDiaye, for it confirms that while recognizable coloured things are indeed dispersed throughout her texts to depict a realist world her most arresting use of colour entails an unleashing of it beyond the representational and into a wash that migrates, bleeds, seeps or pulsates across objects and experiences.

In the second part of *La Naufragée* we note that by contrast with those of his prisoner the painter's colour use is pedestrian. His own colour notations are in fact entirely confined to his attempts, snagged between desire and repulsion, to grasp the chromatic aberration of her body. While the woman-fish 'le regardait, lui, sans le voir' (p.49), by contrast he scrutinizes her, homing in upon the uncertain hue of her skin, eyes, hair, teeth, lips, tail and nipples, resorting to the uneasy adjectives 'grisâtre' (p. 51), 'verdâtre' (p. 55), 'blanchâtre' (p. 61), 'bleuâtres' (p. 65), or to tentative analogies such as 'la couleur du verre à peine bleuté' (p. 49) for her eyes and lips or 'couleur d'herbe ou d'algue' (p. 55) for her hair.¹⁸ Fleeting the painter transfers his attention to her inner life and speculates about her own way of perceiving the world but this tentative empathy is rapidly overridden by his desire to instrumentalize and

¹⁷ *Sun Rising through Vapour: Fishermen Cleaning and Selling Fish* (1807).

¹⁸ This scrutiny of the woman-fish's body parts deliberately invokes the 'scientific' curiosity aroused in the same time period by Khoi Khoi woman Sara Baartman.

possess her. It is left to us as readers to enter the oneiric, blurry wash of colour that constitutes her grasp of the world, to allow our own field of vision to be flooded by hers and by the swell of affect that its rushes of colour bring. In effect, the author of *La Naufragée* asks us to take part in an optical experiment, to sidestep our habitual field of vision and chromatic perception and to accommodate a different one: as the woman-fish sees in the open air so might we see in the depths of the ocean and the processing of colour by different species becomes a live issue. NDiaye seizes upon Turner's colour, then, as a conduit to inexpressible inner states.

How is NDiaye's dialogue with Turner as colourist carried forward into other texts? In *Rosie Carpe*, published just two years after *La Naufragée*, the eponymous heroine's colour perceptions seem to belong to the same kind of specifically painterly experiment and to extend the explorations of the earlier work. For instance, seen through her eyes the white walls, ceiling, floor and furniture of the Carpe family house constitute '[un] blanc total, violent, saturé [...] si insurpassable qu'il lui semblait être non pas le simple blanc mais la source même de tous les blancs possibles',¹⁹ and again: '[c]ette apothéose de blanc l'aveuglait'.²⁰ NDiaye is clearly alluding here to white as the colour of composed light and Rosie's observations on white are of a piece with those of the woman-fish, temporarily blinded by the 'blancheur totale, frémissante'²¹ which invades her field of vision or by the

¹⁹ *Rosie Carpe*, p. 132. NDiaye's interest in absolute white is a chromatic counterpoint to her interest in absolute black in *Papa doit manger* referenced at the start of this article.

²⁰ *Rosie Carpe*, p. 134.

²¹ *La Naufragée*, p. 39.

unbearable ‘luminosité du blanc environnant’.²² Rosie’s cross-species name indeed suggests that she is a close cousin of the woman-fish. What links the two most closely is their experience of colour as indistinct and foggy, and Turner’s notorious yellow washes are aesthetic drivers not only in *La Naufragée* but also in *Rosie Carpe* where yellow has a marked presence.²³

Yellow is a key chromatic note in NDiaye. While it is sometimes present as a localised point of colour and attached to given objects, especially items of clothing, it also seeps amorphously, eluding contour, percolating up across contexts and washing over or staining entire swathes of text. Its application is puzzling, its signification elastic and resistant to ready interpretation although it tends towards the acid and the jaundiced being for the most part connected to distaste, shame, unease, psychic disorder and the memory of pain, especially childhood pain. Yellow takes on different lives according to the chromatic economy of a given text, but it persistently alerts us to ethical concerns. Thus the yellow Vichy dress that migrates and changes hands throughout the latter part of *Ladivine* is caught up in a number of complex exchanges where ethics are compromised;²⁴ thus the yellowness of the house in Berlin that is home to the narrator and her family in *Y Penser sans cesse* is a sensory hinge between the current owners and the ghosts of the Wellensteins, former owners

²² *La Naufragée*, p. 58.

²³ Turner’s taste for strikingly dun or luminous overall yellow tones, as in *Mortlake Terrace* (1827) or *Houses of Parliament 16th Oct 1834* respectively earned him much criticism in the English art milieu.

²⁴ The dress becomes associated with anger, guilt, theft and imposture. See *Ladivine*, pp. 218-19, 228-9, 247, 306-9, 311-12.

killed in the Holocaust;²⁵ and thus in *Trois femmes puissantes* the pungent yellow flowers that lie rotting on the threshold of her father's house are the same as those on Norah's dress fabric, suggesting paternal contamination.²⁶ Further examples that build on the unconventional recourse to yellow in *Rosie Carpe* abound, but my scope here is confined to this first major adventure with yellow.

The singularity of yellow in *Rosie Carpe* has not escaped critical notice. Pierre Brunel comments that '[l]e récit s'enferme volontairement dans des brumes toujours jaunâtres, toujours difficiles à percer ou à dissiper,'²⁷ drawing to our attention the association of yellow with what is cloudy and opaque. Brunel does not however analyse closely the text's saturation in a wide variation of yellowish hues or connect them to colour values in NDiaye more broadly, hence my revisiting of the question here. *Rosie Carpe* is the text which establishes NDiaye as a writer of yellow and yellow dominates – indeed saturates – the second part of this three-part novel (pp. 51-169) which contains some fifteen mentions of yellow in the first four pages alone. Yellow here is especially un-tethered to form. Instead it becomes for Rosie a somewhat unstable objective correlative of a period of the Carpe family life spent in Brive-la-Gaillarde. At once cocooning and menacing, it is not only the colour of the family house, the street and (bizarrely) the garden, but of the very atmosphere of the Brive years. The period, remembered as 'brumeuse, d'un jaune pâle et uni' (p. 51) or as enveloped in a strange 'voile jaune' (p. 51) is characterized as a 'saison jaune, douce, provinciale et pleine d'aspirations' (p. 51). Life was luke-warm, insipid and 'discrètement

²⁵ *Y Penser sans cesse*, pp. 12-13.

²⁶ *Trois femmes puissantes*, pp. 19.

²⁷ See 'Marie NDiaye, *Rosie Carpe* [2001]: Musique répétitive', in *Voix autres, voix hautes. Onze romans de femmes au XX^e siècle* (Paris: Klincksieck, 2002), pp. 207-21 (p. 218).

safranée' or, more bluntly, 'la vie jaune' (p. 52). With the passage of time, Brive is reduced to 'une ombre jaune et pâle', a 'jaune univoque' (p. 57) or a condensed 'tache jaune' (p. 52) in Rosie's mind, a patch of colour or perhaps a stain. Yellow in fact swallows up all other shades from this period which seem to 'se fondre dans le jaune équivoque' (p. 55).

Once Rosie has left Brive, yellow continues to flood into and taint her life, melding and competing with the blue by which she has chosen to distinguish herself (not, we note, the feminine-connoted pink evoked by her name) so that she is carried away in a wash of yellow, 'un flot d'insipidité jaune' (p. 81). Her blue clothes, intended to set her apart from the yellowish wash of Brive and to make her more vivid, give rise only to the ironic perpetuation of a dreary stagnation and to her perceived sense of self as an insignificant 'fadeur bleue' (p. 57) or as a 'fille bleue sombre' (p. 67).²⁸ The well of perplexed daydreams into which Rosie sinks is described as having yellow edges (p. 57) and the very word 'Brive' stimulates a sensation of yellow (p.52). Not only is the protagonist 'égarée de jaune' (p. 98), she also equates herself with the colour: Rosie has a sense of having *been* a dull yellow ('l'impression d'avoir été ce jaune-là, égal et un peu terne' (p. 57)) and even goes so far as to re-name herself chromatically: 'J'étais Rose-Jaune, disait-elle' and then more curiously, 'J'étais Jaune autrefois' (p. 52); as Rosie speaks her new colour name, 'une fulgurance de lumière jaune envahissait son crâne' (p. 69). Her own yellow is cloudy and vaguely shameful, quite unlike the vibrant golden halo that surrounds the disembodied heads of other members of the Carpe

²⁸ Blue seeps through Rosie's story, surfacing in the blue-tinged skin of her feeble son Titi and, implicitly, in ironic references to a Marian model of mothering. On this see Pauline Eaton, 'Rosie Carpe and the Virgin Mary: Modelling Modern Motherhood?', in 'Motherhood, Religions and Spirituality', ed. by Sariya Cheruvallil-Contractor and Gill Rye, special issue of *Religion and Gender*, 6.1 (2016), pp. 29-46.

family when she sees them in her mind's eye 'au coeur d'une gloire jaune éclatante' (pp. 89-90) like a cluster of religious icons in stained glass.

The unpleasant yellow of *Rosie Carpe* is not only the lingering shade of unhealed (emotional) bruising but, moving from Carol Mavor to another chromatically relevant text, Charlotte Perkins Gilman's classic 'The Yellow Wall-paper',²⁹ that of specifically feminine depression or psychosis. Rosie's failing mental and physical health, her slump into fuzzy passivity then later into postpartum depression, her sense of imprisonment and encroaching numbness - aspects of experience shared with Perkins Gilman's first-person narrator - are obsessively associated with a hard-to-define, disturbing yellowness. The faded wallpaper in Perkins Gilman's story is 'the strangest yellow' (p. 654) variously described as 'almost revolting', 'smouldering' and 'unclean' (p. 649) slipping according to the prevailing light between 'sickly sulphur' and a 'dull yet lurid orange' (p. 649), continually expanding its range of hues and making the narrator think of 'all the yellow things I ever saw - not beautiful ones like buttercups, but old foul, bad yellow things' (p. 654) and notably coming with an enduring 'yellow smell' (p. 654). Rosie's yellow too is synaesthetically experienced as smell and substance: it is a 'matière ouatée qui sentait Brive' (p. 54), an impenetrable 'noyau d'une substance jaune cotonneuse' (p. 54). In this haptic colour sensation the sense of Brive as yellow atmosphere congeals into something palpable and suffocating, a kind of wadding or stuffing material that inhibited the entire family, described by Rosie as 'cette bourre jaune qu'ils avaient eue dans la gorge' (p. 55). Later in the novel when Rosie encounters her mother unexpectedly her sudden impression is that 'un objet chaud, jaune, pelucheux lui barrait la gorge' (p. 130).

Yellow attaches itself in particular to un-maternal, dangerous mothers who mutate and become unrecognizable to their children: the mothers of Rosie and her friend Lazare, and

²⁹ *Op. cit.*

indeed Rosie herself. Mme Carpe wears mules of yellow satin (p. 133) and a yellow dress (p. 186). Her vast pregnant belly is seen by Lazare as ‘jaune et fière’ (p. 190). The latter ‘remembers’ that his own mother was wearing a short yellow dress when she abandoned him as a child and imagines her currently sitting in the psychiatric home, wrapped in the yellow rags of the same garment. His mother is destined to be ‘constamment, éternellement enveloppée de jaune vif’ (p. 194). Yellow is also the colour of the pregnant Rosie’s self-disgust: rebuffed for asking acquaintances about the likely identity of the father she has the experience of being ‘ample, informe’ and ‘sentit sa chair jaunâtre couler d’une manière repoussante’ (p. 167).

NDiaye’s ambitious experiment with colour in *Rosie Carpe* attempts to account for the complexity of hard-to-articulate prelinguistic experiences, rooted in childhood, which define the self so thoroughly that it is soaked in them. Colour perception is often used as a way of illustrating the theory of qualia; that is the non-linguistic, private and subjective experience each of us has of the world that is precisely un-shareable and individual.³⁰ Clearly Rosie’s complex, depressive sense of being yellow in spite of herself and the pulsating floods of yellow that suffuse her sense impressions, memory and self-perception are distinct to her and constitute the author’s attempt to give an intense account of her heroine’s inner world. Rosie’s perception is notably as aligned with Turner as that of *La Naufragée*’s woman-fish: both are out of their element, cut off from communication and endangered by yellow, the one by dehydration under the sun’s rays, the other by suffocation. Rosie’s evolving sense of a core or nucleus of yellow ‘au coeur de l’air jaune’ (54) from which she is indissociable returns us to *Light and Colour (Goethe’s Theory)*, the painting that was the final visual

³⁰ For a lucid account see Ned Block, ‘Qualia’ in *The Oxford Companion to the Mind* ed. By Richard L. Gregory, 2nd edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), pp. 785-80.

allusion to this mythical creature's perceptual field. Both the woman-fish and Rosie are 'au coeur du coeur du scintillement'³¹ and indissociable from colour. At the same time, the question of empathy is problematized. Paradoxically, the very detail that is provided to make Rosie vividly available to the reader also makes her incomprehensible, inaccessible, even rebarbative as her experience of infinitely variegated hues of yellow is so radically enigmatic and so unusually laden with potent affect. NDiaye's point - that empathy is no simple matter but may entail a strenuous effort to seek points of connection with what is radically other – is well made here with the assistance of colour.³²

The narrator of *Autoportrait en vert*³³ is obsessively preoccupied not by yellow but by green, or rather by a powerfully seductive sense of greenness. The book, a fragmented first-person diary which incorporates a cache of mysterious photographs is an originally disruptive approach to self-narrative. It is written for the Mercure de France 'Traits et portraits' series which invites artists or writers to produce autobiographical works combining textual and visual material. Its narrator, who resembles, yet is not entirely the same as its author, records a series of troubling encounters with women in green and the varieties of their greenness persistently impose themselves on her consciousness: 'Je me disais', she writes in one entry, 'c'est donc reparti. De nouveau l'ambiguïté, les tâtonnements, les questions sans réponse au sujet de tout ce vert' (p. 31). This observation records one of several moments where colour

³¹ p. 39

³² On empathy see Dominique Rabaté, 'Qui peut l'entendre? Qui peut savoir?', in *Marie NDiaye: l'étrangeté à l'œuvre*, pp. 93-100.

³³ *Op. cit.*

slips its moorings, detaches itself from object or substance and runs wild. Made freshly available, green is interrogated in its own right and experienced as a powerfully intriguing yet elusive stimulus with particular resonance for the narrator. In this brief analysis I consider the density, distribution and values of green in the text and posit some reasons for NDiaye's intensive and unusual recourse to colour in what is her most autobiographical work.

The title, our first cue to NDiaye's chromatic preoccupation, is followed by the book's sole colour image, a photograph taking up the whole of its first page. One of several by Julie Ganzin to be reproduced in the book, it is entitled *Décrire* and depicts a woman in a mountainous landscape in the process of scanning the horizon, shielding her eyes from the sun's glare. The atmosphere seems blurred by a heat haze and the overall hue of the image is a soft, watery green. Together the book's title and opening image launch the greenness of the work so that even before the narrative proper commences, green begins to seep visually and semantically through it, as colour and as word. The term *autoportrait* aligns the exercise with a visual rather than a textual medium, as does the reference to colour which remains ambiguous: are we to understand that the subject is dressed in green, that the whole portrait itself is in shades of green - like Chagall's 1914 work of the same title, a possible intertext -³⁴ or that green defines the author/narrator in some other way, as yet undetermined? Ganzin's photograph is an especially relevant opening note given that its title, subject and washed-out aesthetic, point to a hermeneutic difficulty that will characterize what follows.

Subsequent uses of the word 'vert' and of ideas expressed by it oscillate between locatable colour and all-suffusing colour experience, and between a realist and a fantastical register. Garments of green hue - pale green, dark green, almond green, bottle green, emerald

³⁴ Chagall's painting uses a soft, muddy green for the artist's clothes and room, and the same hue is dominant on the palette he holds.

green, etc. – mark out the wearers as mysterious ‘femmes en vert’, ‘à la fois êtres réels et figures littéraires’ (p. 77). Perceptions of an unusual density of green have still more troubling associations: Katia Petiteville, all in green, leaps from her balcony (p. 24); the narrator’s childhood schoolmistress, also clad in green, gripped her charges with dangerously strong hands (p. 15); Jenny, found hanging by the neck in her cellar wearing green velvet trousers and a green satin shirt (p. 53), makes a ghostly return in a luxurious coat with green fur trimmings (p. 57); the narrator’s former school friend is now married to her father and dresses only in green (p. 30). A series of slippages detaches greenness uncannily from materiality: ‘femmes en vert’ become ‘femmes vertes’ (p. 68); ‘vert’ is used to describe a presence (p. 9) and even the timbre of a voice (p. 91). Greenness, in other words, need not be visible, an observation which launches the apprehension of colour into a quite other realm. Recognizing that her estranged mother is ‘un type de femme en vert d’un genre que je n’ai encore jamais rencontré’ (p. 68) the narrator continues: ‘[n]ul besoin de la voir réellement vêtue de vert – d’une certaine façon nous n’en sommes plus à ces enfantillages’ (p. 68).

The cast of uncanny women in green - neighbours, friends, sisters, mother – who de- and re-materialize (including in the text’s numerous photographs) provoke an ambivalent reaction in the narrator: they are at once magnetically attractive and threatening. Like the narrator of Gilmore’s ‘The Yellow Wall-paper’ she spends much of her time trying to make sense of them. They do not stoop and creep rapidly as do Gilmore’s women, but instead are imperious, sensual, threatening perhaps precisely because they are ‘métamorphosable[s] à l’infini’ (p. 72). They are not easy to detect and the narrator alone can perceive them. She becomes almost fond of them, fascinated by them and ultimately aligns herself with them, not in spite of but because of the way they prick, sting and bruise her. This recalls the narrator of ‘The Yellow Wall-paper’ who not only believes in the place behind the paper and the women who emerge from it, but who furthermore identifies with them and finds life ‘very much more

exciting' (p. 653) on account of their yellow presence. In the same way NDiaye's narrator is attached to the strangely familiar women in green who constitute the originality of her inner world: 'elles ornent mes pensées, ma vie souterraine' (p. 77).

Ultimately, the greenness that surfaces and washes over *Autoportrait en vert* like a green filter amounts to a 'palette intérieure'³⁵ that accounts chromatically for the narrator's submerged anxieties. Qualities associated with the spectrum of green are acidity, bile, fear, and an uneasy fascination. Green is attractive yet threatens to submerge the narrator. It belongs, she muses, picking up on and interrogating one of the clichés that confine our thinking about colour to particular semantic grooves, on the chromatic spectrum of wickedness: while green 'ne saurait être [...] la seule couleur de la méchanceté', nor 'fatalement la couleur de la méchanceté', it is undeniable, she declares, that 'la méchanceté aime tout particulièrement s'orner de toutes sortes de verts [...]' (pp.15-16).

NDiaye's decision to foreground colour in her self-portrait and to do so in this particular way is surely ironic, and part of her determination to scramble the conventions of life-writing. What more pointed jibe could there be at those who persisted in seeing her as a woman of colour and in viewing her identity reductively through the prism of blackness than to focus on a quite other chromatic obsession associated with the (non-epidermal) colour of her inner world? The insistently recurring green, in tandem with the book's shocking-pink cover – a paratextual phenomenon equivalent in its unexpectedness to a shout or a joke, not least in the case of an author associated with the much quieter white or clotted-cream coloured covers of Éditions de Minuit or Gallimard – constitute a chromatic diversion and a refusal on the part of the author to lock this intimate text into a purely postcolonial dynamic.

³⁵ Didier Jacob, 'Marie NDiaye par elle-même: Le rayon vert', *Le Nouvel Observateur* 3-9 February 2005, p.89.

NDiaye thus invites an understanding of herself via colour but in a way that bypasses any socio-political confession about the experience of blackness and produces instead a portrait of her disquieting creative imagination, her frequent sense of being ‘au bord du précipice’³⁶ and her expression of obscure oneiric terrors and obsessions rendered in part by the unfixing and unleashing of colour.

In conclusion, this article has suggested that NDiaye’s works pursue carefully elaborated colour systems that may include, but that very deliberately exceed the question of skin colour and that jolt readers out of the groove of lazy colour thinking. Her careful and sparing use of colour, her emphasis on washes, on the shifting hues of a given colour and on colour as sensation and affect stray away from colour as something that can be contained, that remains constant, or that easily signifies and re-establish its complex relation to perception and the senses. I have argued above all that colour relates to the problems of ethics and empathy as they are elaborated by NDiaye and that her chromatic experiments, lingering on the fault line between the realist and fantastic axes of her writing, raise important questions about the shared nature of perception and sensation. There are few contemporary writers of fiction so intent on making colour newly available for consideration.

³⁶ Interview with Anne Diatkine, ‘Le don de trouble-vue’, *Libération*, 16 February 2005, p.24.