

THIRD TEXT

CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON CONTEMPORARY ART AND CULTURE



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Anechoic White? Meta-colour in South Asia

Natasha Eaton

PRELUDE: 'WHITE ON WHITE'

Lost I am finally found
On the landscape of your alchemical hues.
- Sukanya Garg

Concluding her brief elegy to white to accompany her recent exhibits, artist-critic and former political economist Sukanya Garg finds herself not so much immersed in but on the landscape of white's alchemical hues. Garg's own work, to which I will return, hesitates when faced with immersion in 'pure white'. To be on the landscape is to conjecture 'on' as a preposition; to be physically in contact with; on as mark on a surface; to be on topic. 'On' as an adverb conventionally means to be physically in contact with or supported by a surface; it is movement or action continued; it suggests an event taking place. It might be described as a plateau, plateau meant as 'an orchestration of crashing bricks extracted from a variety of different edifices' which 'carry traces of their former emplacement, which give them a spin defining the arc of their vector'.¹ This might be a multi-layered, porous landscape; a series of geological plateaus can also be thought of as being like skin. Both complicate the notion of being 'on' or 'meta' in relation to colour and matter.





Sukanya Garg, *Untitled* (2016) and *Shades of Addiction* (2016)

In 'Remarks on Colour' written during the last eighteen months of his life, Ludwig Wittgenstein became fascinated by white. Experimenting with a sheet of white paper held against blue sky or snow, concluding that white shines in its surroundings or is cloudy, he conjectured whether Lichtenberg had been right to say that very few people have ever seen pure white. It's curious why Wittgenstein turned to white when dying. Do all great writers and art makers seek redemption from, perhaps also for colour (or of a colour) just before death? Two of the most obvious and one might say fatalistic instances of this are Jorge Luis Borges' search for the fiery vibrant mysticism of red – the colour that he misses as his eyesight failed or Derick Jarman's haunting, voice-over of Yves Klein Blue. Early on in the published 'Remarks' (no 17) Wittgenstein notes that just as in some respects he was following Goethe (implied rather than stated), Goethe had been tracing and erasing Otto Runge's claim that if all colours are transparent or opaque, 'white is an opaque colour' which shows 'the indeterminateness in the concept of colour or again in that of the sameness of colour' as transparency or depth.² Although famously making the claim that every serious philosophical question holds within itself the possibility that we 'must always be prepared to learn something totally new', Wittgenstein remained until his death troubled by white which is perhaps hardly surprising given its violent 'spectral dizziness' and its associations with colonialism.

Spectral dizziness is something that has fascinated Michael Taussig in his madly fascinating essays published as 'What Colour is the Sacred?' which animate, sometimes anthropomorphise and critique the modern fetishisation of colour.³ Mimetic in style, Taussig gleans the glimpses of the 'butterfly' quality of Benjamin's hashish infused view of colour in Ibiza and plays with Malinowski's jottings, colonial indigo's exploitation as a precursor to Nazi colour. Surrealist, sacred, colonial and pathological, colour for Taussig is a 'magical polymorphous substance' which necessarily blurs the boundaries between chromophilia and chromophobia.⁴ In his earlier work Taussig sought out, like early ethnographers the myth of the white Indian in South America. Mimetically disruptive, brought into contact with the predatory wonders of modern technologies whiteness fascinated in its tragic exposure to the outside world – outside world as proto spectacle and eugenics with a Caruso-inflection of the recording of white noise.⁵ But can colour also be redeemed from 'high' artistic practice to be located in/as visual tactics of the everyday?

'WHITE ON WHITE': THE PRESENT CONTINUOUS FACING FABULATION

Life is won by wresting colours from the past.
- Gilles Deleuze

My slight intervention here to do with white asks whether Wittgenstein's 'pure white' or Taussig's colour as a 'meta' or 'polymorphous' artistic experiment can be held up as a swatch, screen or stain to the 'aesthetics' and corpo-aesthetics of contemporary India. I take as my focus a small exhibition of about 100 works shown by twenty artists at NIV – an NGO in southern Delhi, April 2016, titled 'White on White' this show claimed to be an experiment. In this anachronistically 'black box'/white cube space professional and amateur artists were able to engage with the concept of pure white.



View of NIV, 'White on White' exhibition, Delhi, 2016

Certainly white in relation to India has been written about regarding Goan trance but also regarding the fallout of the politics of the governed. Psychedelic white, as Arun Saldanha puts it, seeks to push 1980s work on white in the direction of a method called 'ethnography as thought'.⁶ Colour seeps into the life of contemporary India at the present with an inflection on whiteness. This is not only abrasive high art, high caste whiteness – the kind of whiteness long vilified by scholars and writers – primarily Toni Morrison and Richard Dyer or Sara Ahmed – but whiteness of a slightly different kind. For Gandhi, the colour of *Satyagraha* was the white or colourless yarn of *khadi* which also photographed better in the propaganda material of mass rallies which is maybe one reason why he encouraged his supporters to wear white. As is well known, his first sustained political campaign on his return to India was his fight against the British colonial exploitation of indigo workers in Bihar. In the blurring of politics and physiology, the chromatic polarities are not black and white but indigo and white, tempered by saffron.⁷ Rabindranath Tagore was less optimistic believing white to be so deeply engrained in the psyche of colonialism's visual culture and its inherent racism, that it could not be so easily redeemed.

With the passing of Swadeshi and its emphasis on handmade materials (it did persist to some degree in the art schools of Calcutta, Santiniketan, Baroda), during Nehruvian modernity's mass industrialisation artists could begin to experiment with a vast array of new synthetic colours or have recourse to European pigments and dyes. Certainly now chromatic algorithms have become big business. As the rhetorical claims to democratic access to the chroma of the web are increasingly made, it's paradoxical that the doxa of cybernetics is making it increasingly cryptic to comprehend how colour is being produced and farmed out, expressed nicely by Carolyn L Kane:

The democratization of colour... is my own double speak. Democratic digital colour is bright, fun, easy to use, has widespread availability and access but it is also bound up in a radical homogeneity of use and enforced protocols and compression standards, which in turn, contribute to a greater opacity and inaccessibility to basic colour-computational processes... Transparent screens for opaque ontology.⁸

Bill Gates' monopoly of the cold play of digital colour – CORBIS – is now 'offshore' by way of a Chinese consortium at The Getty so to speak. The stylised interface of colour pertains to the cold of the phosphorescent and the fluorescent which can be perceived by the eye at a rate seventy-five percent faster than other colours. They shine three times brighter and they can 'seduce the human eye', fifty-nine percent to return for a second look. White as the current interfacial 'ground' of immaterial working practices is cold. It is a kind of fluorescent colour that reflect colours according to its own laws. Maybe it might seem to be the 'logical' outcome of the kind of decommissioning and commercial experiments of such entrepreneurs as the Switzer brothers which entered mainstream US culture in the 1930s and 1940s leading to the manufacturing rhetoric of such products as detergent which claimed to be 'whiter than white' – the dayglow equivalent of night glow army signs. During the Holocaust, bodies were collected for the sole purpose of recycling teeth, hair and nails as synthetic, often glistening materials. Following World War Two the Soviets appropriated the manufacturing plant of Agfa Colour (part of IG Farben). It does not appear that the technologies or the range of colours (Agfa uses a very precise combination of blue, green and

magenta in its cinematic and photographic film) had changed since the Nazi scientific experiments with colour and its psychological implications. Possibly those using Agfa colour in the decades after the war were still seeing the world in Nazi colour.

So what then would be the issues at stake in thinking through colour that harks back to India of the 1950s and 1960s? Has this been superseded up a hyper-globalising economy of shine or can they coexist? Cement, steel, metals, viscose staple fabric, chemicals and carbon black as just some of their ventures, industry in India are monopolised by the Tata and Birla Groups.⁹ Supplying arms, patenting of resources and the unlawful and violent takeover of land have not stopped the growth of conglomerates like Tata. Both Birla and Tata specialise in paints and pigments; Birla is the world's largest producer and exporter of carbon black (aside from paints carbon black is primarily used as a filler in tyre production as well as being valued for its tinting strength in resins and film).¹⁰

No doubt the most ambitious governmental-cultural experiment of that time is Nehru's investment in the 'brutalist' aesthetic of the concrete white city of Chandigarh. Concrete and steel (ie factories of Nehru's Five Year Plans) hailed a blinding white, shiny new aesthetic. Concrete and steel have a tendency to weather into sad, pitted, unstable greyness; to grow dull, to rust, to be secretly supplemented by a subaltern rubbish garden.¹¹ Aluminium however is forever shining as a metaphor of 'Bharat Uday' – or so it would seem. If there is tarnish it is when it takes the place of mirror in the contemporary arcade. Unabashed in his ever-growing commercial industry of artworks which play on the 'icons' of everyday life – Subodh Gupta's steel milk churns, plates, once dazzled with their pristine gleam. The everyday turned spectacle might be most famously known by his Damien Hurst inspired skull 'Very Hungry God' on display at Palazzo Grassi on the Grand Canal, Venice, but may be more telling is the presence of his 'Line of Control' at the centre of a half built mall in Saket, southern Delhi. Visiting an archival installation of the work of Dayanita Singh at KNMA (in this mall), I was struck by the sense of melancholia, the not yet open galleries and numerous liquor stores reflected in the slightly rusting aluminium utensils making up Gupta's piece. At the height of his fame around the time of the BJP's 'India Shining' campaign, there is something tired, clichéd and faded about this gargantuan work. This as yet unfinished mall, already feels obsolete; as a post-Shining arcade which eludes Walter Benjamin's efforts to re-enliven nascent promises dormant in the dreamsleep of capitalism through the confusionist throws and thrall of the mirror.



Subodh Gupta, *Lines of Control*, 2008

'WHITE ON WHITE': PHOTOGRAPHIC SYNAESTHESIA

Abandon myself to it and plunge into its mystery; it thinks of itself within me.
- Maurice Merleau Ponty, 'Phenomenology of Perception'

Reading a Saturday newspaper on 2 April 2016 I chanced upon a brief mention of 'White on White' opening at NIV that day. Down a short lane at the side of NeeRaj bookstore on Neb Serai, near to Saket metro in south Delhi is NIV. NIV meaning homestead is the project of the Matthews family. A former factory, NIV is made up of three main components – the art project, the gallery space devoted primarily to residencies and a school project in Noida, east of Delhi.

'White on White' is far from a new concept. Malevich, the White Cube and the title and concept of a group show of which seasoned curator-artist Shobha Broota was a part. Working with many students individually at any one time, Shobha Broota was concerned that there was a whiff of anxiety about their lack of formal art school training. Well aware of the restrictions of artistic pedagogy available to the majority of students – an emphasis on painting on the body is the norm in many colleges – Broota sought the inverse – a single colour (or non-colour – she seems undecided on this) and the absence of the body as far as possible. To remove a colour or to think of white as a non-colour has numerous artistic precedents perhaps naturally so. The evacuation of colour leaves behind greys, white and grisaille, a kind of 'dirty light'.¹²

When pressed on the concept of the show beyond her own practice (which I am sure she is tired of talking about), Shobha recalls how visiting the last Venice Biennale white had been a blind spot. No doubt tired by the exhausting spectacle of the biennale in a place as 'spectacular' as Venice she moved quickly through

the Uruguay pavilion which seemed nothing more than a blind spot. On second thoughts, its folds, the soft shadowed undersides of its miniscule stick-on geometry, offered up myopia as world. Its linear patterns like circuit boards offered aerial views of impossible Calvinesque cities, genetic engineering of nervous systems: a thesaurus of the infinitesimal and the undecipherable. Although Marco Maggi's 'Global Myopia II' was considered by some critics to be one of the less overtly political pavilions at the Venice Biennale, in comparison with Enwezor's three-room Palazzo Centrale, focussed on *Das Kapital* (including contributions from Isaac Julien, David Harvey, John Akomfrah and Alexander Kluge) perhaps this might be elliptically right, elliptically white.

According to several of Shobha Broota's participating students, white hovered somewhere, somehow as a blind spot to be (come) overwhelming, unrealisable, unrecognisable. White as 'an experience of the profoundness of simplicity, the abundance in less, the cosmic sounds in silence and the essence of nothingness'. White's 'retrospective subtraction'; 'the experience of exploring the phenomena of "abundance"'; 'My first reaction on hearing about 'White on White' was, what, how, and if it will be possible'; 'both frustrating and challenging'; 'like playing hide and seek with colour, colourlessness, and shadows' and 'the dazzlement of this play'. White 'is a sign of supremacy and superiority'; 'I wanted to touch the minimum. I tried to listen to the vibrations of its silence' (NIV 2016; personal communication).



Rashmi Kharuna, *Untitled*, NIV, 2016

What kind of civil contract of photography is involved when you hold an old bucket above your head?! End of exhibition antics but nonetheless maybe there is an aspect of the chamber of dreams. The chamber of dreams is a notion put forward by Christopher Pinney to think with subaltern photography/photography of the subaltern. Seemingly deriving from both royal and middle class ('swagger posturing') practices the studio aesthetic is nonetheless a ludic and ethical space for the experimentation with dreams. Initially Rashmi Kharuna's corner installation places the calming effects of white in relation to everyday ablutions. Kharuna eschewed Broota's remit of pure white in favour of white washed greys, yellowish jasmine flowers with the aim of creating a space for bathing as quiet contemplation. Perhaps not wanting to tamper with the media of and form of her exuberant large scale coloured abstracts which had been the subject of a monographic show at NIV, she chose materials that putrefied, becoming somewhat fetid – the seeming opposite of the mesmerising placement of flowers, pollen and colour by the German artist Wolfgang Laib.

As opposed to Laib's pristine, abstract surfaces, the exuberant makeshift shower with its milk and jasmine flowers Kharuna happily allowed to spoil and spill. Milk of course has archaic associations with old fashioned techniques of bathing as well as being an uncanny/miraculous interface between the human body and the gods.¹³ Although not normally associated with miracles, on at least one well known occasion shrines dedicated to Shiva, images of the gods began to drink milk. Possibly with reference to this Kharuna lightly painted Siva's familiar forehead symbol, displayed alongside a five-minute cut-out of a cloth meant to symbolise a Sufi robe as bathing becomes a compressed performance of two distinct, if interrelated religious desires to engage with the divine.

Self-taught and respected as an artist, practising Sufi Kharuna declared:

Soaking in
 The joyful silence
 Of White
 AHHH...
 The colours of rainbow
 Have emerged!!!
 In this moment
 Of celebration
 Drowning deep
 In my meditation.¹⁴

In everyday life, the basic Sufi colours are black or dark blue which are associated with the mourning of *nafs*. Once this state of repentance (*tawba*) is reached, Sufis can wear white robes to denote their washing away of worldly concerns.¹⁵

Colour broadly speaking in Islam (*rang*) can be viewed the attempt of light to become visible. It can be summarised that colours are a kind of veil through which colourless light can be perceived. In the Qu'ran white is the colour of the faces of the blessed on Doomsday; inhabitants of Paradise dress in white and green silk to show the heavenly light in which they are clad. In Arabic, there is a special verb reserved for colour (*ifalla*) – a verb which also applies to descriptions of corporeal defect. Here the last consonant and the trilateral root of the word are doubled. A second, rarer form is formed from the extension of the vowel after the second radical which is used for very few verbs – for instance *ihmarra* – to turn red or to blush or *ibyadda* to turn white. White (which appears eight times in the Qu'ran) refers to the colours of creation; as a symbol of purity and as a quality of the water in Paradise.¹⁶ There is the beauty of being able to 'glow in white' (Qu'ran 3, 106–107) but white is also associated with temporary blindness or with eyes turning 'white with sorrow' (Qu'ran 12: 84).

In Sufi contemplation white is associated with *sirr* which is located in the solar plexus, is far from Newton's empirical condensation of seven colours as light. What is common to both Sufism and Newtonian theory is that all colours to be seen (either empirically or through spiritual exercises internally experienced) can be quantified as seven. Being associated with, perhaps even for some Sufis as *sirr*, white can be seen within the hierarchy of inner learning as the fourth mystical veil. White reads the odes of Allah for the individual in similitude to that which is originally present in *Loh-e-moh foz* (Preserved Scripturum). White both numerically and mystically is a kind of half way point; it helps the seeker of enlightenment contemplate their journey from blue before the higher spiritual realms of the spirit (yellow), the luminous (terrifying) realm of the black light and the most difficult to attain – green, emerald light – the divine centre of being and the closest approximation of God that the devotee can experience. *Sirr* might mean knowledge but it is also secret, pertaining to *Aalam-e-Misal* – the proto-synaesthetic Allegorical Realm of negation.

For one NIV contributor student and activist Aditya Verma his view of the world involves what he terms *photographic synaesthesia*. Like the other contributors who voice their views of the exhibition, Aditya Verma was keen to stress that he had used locally sourced, everyday materials including nylon which he used in other works along with graffiti at protest sites:

I experience synaesthesia, so I associate colour, sound and smell across senses. I paint what I hear, I paint the food that I eat, and I photograph sounds. So colour is subject to the same treatment. Minimal, absence and presence, death, part of the sky, colour of humour, colour of humor, and white as a colour of unity.

On the contrary, I don't perceive white as white, the congregation of the letters W-H-I-T-E, as that is merely social dogma and I don't wish to comply with the meanings, society has taught me to decipher of specific colours. As soon as I internalise that white becomes a resonant with every other colour, and stationary objects start vibrating, for me.

Colour of Humour and colour of humor arose from the theory of two things. White light falling upon our eyes, often directly passes through the white of our eyes, the Vitreous humour, to reach us. The function of this is to increase brightness, or luminosity of the perceived real world... The next, white as a colour of humor. The fact that in India, death is in white sheets, and so is birth. White lies, white bedsheets, white light behind the X-ray, white chalk in the classroom, white clothes of the funeral procession... I imagine death to be an infinite field of white. And life, another infinite field of white light passing over it. Profoundness, is in the realisation of this fact, enlightenment is in becoming the white field. Hence white for me becomes a colour of unity.¹⁷

White then pertains to a certain kind of politics of the governed in middle class India. It becomes an entry point into the NGO-aesthetic (away from the filth of the public sphere, Kaviraj, 1997). But what if you are not so privileged; is white stalking both the corridors of power and barefoot practices of everyday life?

'PURE GIFT': FAIR AND LOVELY

The sun gives without ever receiving.
- Georges Bataille, 'The Accursed Shore'

In March 2016, the Vice President of the Congress Party Rahul Gandhi claimed that Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi had been converting black money into white. Modi had launched a 'Fair and Lovely Yojana'. In modern Hindi, the word *yojanaa* (Hindi: योजना) means 'plan' or blueprint, and is etymologically connected with the Vedic notion of distance in the word *yojana*. *Yojana* is also alchemical and astrological. Damning but not censored for its reference to a multi-national product, Gandhi used an aesthetic of whiteness as the mode of attack on Modi's economic policies. 'Fair' (if not lovely – that would be too subjective?!) is common to many marriage adverts posted in newspapers and online. As adjective, adverb and noun, 'fair' has multiple affective significations: to be just, even handed, to be pale, to be pretty, to have a fair chance, fair weather, to be neither good nor bad. To be fair at something is perhaps to be mediocre. Fair does not quite translate into Hindi or Urdu (*shabd-kosh, be ayb*) and like many commodities giving it an English name bestows a border fetish stasis – something desired and possibly dangerous.

Perhaps also fair and lovely invites play as in one of Wittgenstein's language games while speaking more ominously to neoliberalism in India today. This is hardly representative of Fanon's 'Black Skin White Masks' yet there is a sinister mimetic desire to be Modi's *doppelgänger* and to debunk the face as one of the better kept secrets of public life. Modi's BJP led coalition is committed in its project of taking white to a grassroots level by way of its economic collaboration with Hindustan Lever Ltd (hereafter HUL). Rather than multinational bashing, perhaps in the spirit of inquiry required by an NGO aesthetic with all its limitations HUL stands in for statist politics picking up the pieces where statist politics has failed.

As is well known, William Hesketh Lever collaborated with King Leopold of Belgium to produce palm-oil based soap products using what was effectively slave labour in the Congo. From the 1880s, the Lever brothers were marketing Sunlight soap in colonial India where leading Indian 'nationalist' artists exemplified by nationalist icon Rajah Ravi Varma, designed chromolithographic posters and calendars which showed how fetish, aura and *darsán* forged a force field of 'divine' and magical energies within the everyday subaltern world of the bazaar. Today Sunlight Soap's mnemonics linger on in Hindu images even when the product has been painted out of the picture. Between erased commodity and godliness there occurs a ludic mimetic short circuit. What I mean by this is, to play on the words of Kajri Jain, the gods might come to market but the iconography of the gods owes something to the imagistic rhetoric of the commodity which cannot entirely be abandoned.¹⁸

For Jacques Derrida, 'pure' and 'gift' might compose the most beautiful compound because of their impossible union. As is well known, Derrida made the case that for a gift to be recognised as such necessarily annuls its status as gift.¹⁹ The impossibility of the pure gift (even if it lacks the exuberance of Bataille's aecomic excess as suggested in the epigraph above) still holds within itself an image of desire. Colour can spill outside of the commodity (Benjamin on asphalt etc) just as gift spills over into commodity and commodities are often gifts – even when they involve grey juridical areas such as copyright claims on the body and illicit trafficking in bodily organs. Perhaps whitening substances exist somewhere between recognition and identification, occupying a place not dissimilar to Fanon writing about his own psychic trauma of being torn apart by a whitening world.

Fair and Lovely has long promised (and still maintains that promise) that by using the cream your skin can become 'four shades fairer in 14 days'. Another claim is that it takes six weeks to work properly as intriguingly suggested in several advertising campaigns. As an art historian working on colour, I became curious about how this shading was determined. I've asked Hindustan Unilever to respond.

Proudly claiming that its team of scientists had spent two whole years devising Fair and Lovely, which does not now seem very long, Hindustan Unilever chose India as its target market.²⁰ The cream still claims over eighty percent of the whitening market in India. First patented in 1971 following the patenting of niacinamide, a melanin suppressor, which is the cream's base ingredient, Fair and Lovely was launched in south India during Emergency (1975–1977), a part of India believed by HUL as a potential darker skinned market than northern India. Niacinamide, (containing Vitamin B and nicotinic acid) increases ceramide and free fatty levels in the skin. It can be toxic for the liver. With the early slogan that the cream 'makes you fairer in Nature's own way', making 'your inner fairness bloom', the cream offered a bright future at a time when domestic bliss and the politics of the home came to take on a greater agency given the lack of political access to the public sphere. Certainly, when Indira Gandhi suspended democracy, women's agency in the media was seen to promote a withdrawal from the world into the space of the home or to be projected in the unprecedented violence of mid 1970s Bollywood films characterised by *dacoitry* and other forms of unlawfulness – the kind of films that made Amitabh Bachchan a superstar. Such films offered few roles or points of identification for women. The proliferation of colour film, superseding also the more art house aesthetic of 1950s and 1960s film, served to show how white the actresses were or had become. Not Nargis' wheat coloured beauty or sometimes sun, sweat and mud worn out heroism but viscose saris, kitten heels and a pale face (this seems to be have been largely achieved through heavy make-up and studio

lighting but maybe also imported skin whitening products). This is more in keeping with Pakistani cinema than the sun kissed look of Hollywood at that time.

The advertising campaigns for Fair and Lovely (which amounts to an annual expenditure of at least five million dollars) try to present the product as a gift, as an act of kindness. Not much bigger than a tampon, the gleaming white plastic tube is already stamped with the familiar iconography: a darker woman in the background demands to be read as the shadow of a former self now discarded and abject. The notion of afterimage can in this packaging be read as a doubled mimetic switching device. Of course this can be more ludically construed through Christopher Pinney's research on the photographic studios of central India from just a few years later.²¹ Here the shadow might be perceived as a kind of halo perhaps; a falling off of the light of the studio or the gleam/glare of the beholder/camera. This continuum between viewer, producer and technologies in the face of aura throws the marketing of Fair and Lovely into a register of an ill-known aura. Possibly also here in both cases the shadow does the work of mirror image.

Fair and Lovely issues the disclaimer that the effects of its skin cream are cumulative but also reversible. You can plan your beauty regime around it and have the brief hit for your marriage without damaging your skin. But by promoting an 'aesthetics of the ephemeral' of course the brand also wants to suggest daily use for any effects is required.²² Reversibility is possibly just a get out clause deemed necessary due to the growing criticism of skin whitening products. In 2011, the Indian Journal of Dermatology published a study which claimed that sixty percent of patients who had facial skin problems had been using self-prescribed steroid-based creams – a condition dubbed 'topical steroid-dependent face'. For anti-whitener campaigners this is India's silent epidemic.²³ It is fair to say that the majority of users of whitening products are unaware that they contain mercury, lead, nickel and chromium (verified in a recent study by the Delhi NGO – the Centre for Science and Environment). The CSE's pollution monitoring lab PML found mercury in forty-four per cent of the fairness creams it tested. Inorganic mercury can cause anxiety, depression, psychosis and peripheral neuropathy. Whilst this is illegal and unlawful there are more than enough legal loopholes which can grant cosmetic licenses for products that should be classified as drugs. The World Health Organization's definition of a drug is 'any substance or product that is used or intended to be used to modify or explore psychological systems or pathological states for the benefit of the recipient'. For campaigners this is not only a psychological and social problem but also a public health issue. In September 2015, the Maharashtra Food and Drug Administration, responding to a complaint put forward by the association of Indian dermatologists (IADVL), removed one brand of fairness cream from sale in the state. This was in response to doctors' complaints at a federal level that the fairness product Fair for Men and No Scars for Women produced by Chandigarh-based Torque Pharma, whilst being promoted as cosmetic creams, in fact contain a potentially harmful steroid – mometasone – which is for use only in prescription drugs.²⁴ It is also claimed that a lot of the creams just do not list their ingredients – hardly uncommon in beauty products.

In 2014 the Advertising Standard of India issued a memo ordering that any advertisement which reinforced negative stereotypes based on colour must be banned. However, in the same year Midas Care launched Clean and Dry: Freshness + Fairness which claimed to 'brighten the vagina'. As if in joyous celebration (marriage etc) around the pale torso of a supine woman, pale and darker pink rose petals flutter, no doubt caught in the golden aura, the Midas touch that outlines this fragment of a body. Less heavily outlined in gold is her hairless pubic area. 'Clean and Dry' is more than a douche bag; it claims to whiten the vagina. The best-known advert for this product sees a middle-class woman disappear into the bathroom to shower using the product before emerging smiling before her smiling husband and children. According to Shivangi Gupti, head of Midas Care, there has been huge demand for 'Clean and Dry' adding to the status of whitening products currently generating an annual income of four hundred and fifty million dollars and outselling Coca Cola. GIA market research indicates that the global skin lightening industry is worth ten billion dollars.²⁵ In India the annual market growth of women's skin whitening products is growing at a rate of ten to fifteen per cent per annum while the male market growth is as high as twenty-five per cent. In 2010, Vaseline (also a Unilever company) released a survey that revealed 'fair, glowing and spotless skin' to be Indian women's topmost desire. Whiteness over dieting.²⁶ Skin whitening is not confined to the middle classes. Many young people without the means to keep spending sixty rupees on Fair and Lovely make their own sometimes dangerous concoctions.²⁷

SHAKTI, SHINE, SHADE: THE WHITE STAGE

Man in effect knows how to play with the mask as that beyond which there is the gaze. The screen here is the locus of mediations.

- Jacques Lacan

In many ways the most intriguing reading of Lacan's notion of the screen pertains to its relationship with Roger Caillois' mimicry. Caillois had described mimicry in insects as conceptually akin to photography, as teleplasty which allows the screen to be seen as a kind of osmotic, dynamic space. Mimicry for both involves travesty, camouflage and intimidation.²⁸ The screen becomes 'something like a mask, a double, an

envelope, a thrown-off screen'. In his reading of Lacan, Bhaskar Mukhopadhyay follows Sontag's notion that we in the West learn to see ourselves photographically, producing a certain anticipatory congealing. But this is ultimately rejected in his discussion of the disjuncture of media and subaltern fabulation as 'a thousand tiny, subaltern globalisations. Globalisation exists as an imaginary produced by the disenfranchised which is in no way commensurate with grass roots level democracy.²⁹ If this does involve 'a [re]mediatisation of social imagination', it is also 'that zone of occult instability where the people dwell'.³⁰ Possibly this pertains to a Baroque optic coupled with the assumption of a lack of conference – an optic that thrives on the viral and the feral. The viral and the feral occupy a world of fantasy, rumour and fabulation – ie the land of small talk or 'other' forms of lore. This is the world wherein certain dynamics of globalisation might be presented as gift – 'the *daan* of globalisation'. In Mukhopadhyay's case study thousands of villagers queue outside the gates of a Calcutta stadium on the alleged basis that bicycles from China will be distributed for free. Here 'there is a strict analogy between their entitlement to rights seemingly dependent on the dis-action of the regime in power and their entitlement to access the marketplace. Both are considered as gift'.³¹

Finding that other whitening brands were beginning to crowd the middle-class market (such as X-treme Bite), HUL capitalised on the BJP's lifting of trading restrictions to launch its micro-financial programme 'Project Shakti'. White and light coalesce as incandescence for the future. This bright light brings with it access to the internet as part of Project I-Shakti. Project I-Shakti set up its first community IT portal in Andhra Pradesh in 2010. The rhetoric speaks of entrepreneurs chosen by the villages. Access is free; the vetted material is projected in what is considered to be the most commonly spoken local language. There is the opportunity to do email; to receive information about health, hygiene, education, agriculture, games, entertainment, money, jobs, vets and personal grooming. The projected reach so far is 9,500 villages encompassing eighteen million people. All the content is backed by a local voice over. On all content, users can post questions. The rhetoric of the visual is not unsurprisingly similar but tied to the kind of rural-mindedness idiom associated with 1920s Congress speeches and 1950s cinema. To be seated in the light shadowed, burned to a shadow, at best a silhouette, is to be held within the aura of the wheat ear. The wheat ear in double is a kind of 'laureate' attribute to the figure of One on the one rupee coin. Money, food, within Project I-Shakti's marketing the single ear offers to the eye a kind of switching device between internet portal and the purchase of a tractor working a green and pleasant land. To be captured in the blinding light of inspiration is divided from the more photorealist dream by a curvaceous red and the blur into mauve – a beautiful miasma of colour where gloaming blends with twilight – the kind of amorphous, ambiguous colours that fascinated Goethe. If gods have haloes, there is the promise that for everyone that being in the light and move with the rhythms of the chromatic undulations of this yielding ground.

Project I-Shakti's marketing plays on the back of Project Shakti's celebration of women's agency. As abstract concept and chromolithograph Bharat Mata (Mother India) is as Sumathi Ramaswamy has argued, indicative of lines of flight of the sacred into the secular (Ramaswamy, 2010). Her provocative term 'barefoot cartography' which reads rhetorically for the most part, can be taken more literally in and beyond the rhetoric of Project Shakti. An earth shaded silken veil is blown from the diamond-bright shard that stands for India. Out of the rhetorical relay of the virtual-actual potential of the image, diamond and barefoot.

To become a 'diamond amm' representing Project Shakti is to walk tirelessly as a pedlar between villages on a five-kilometre radius with a range of products which can be set up as a small store at home, on a hand, or camel pulled cart. You can say it is not unusual to have the visiting spectacle – the museo-bus, the rumours and reality of Indra Gandhi's sterilising stations in the 1970s – both with the promise and magic of the radio-as gift and maybe more recently, ludically redeemed by such modular exhibits as the singing bucket. The 'success' of the Shakti amms has led to Hindustan Lever's extension of Project Shakti to include men dubbed *Shakti-maans*. Men are given a wider geographical remit and a bicycle.³²

The rhetoric of 'subaltern enlightenment' (or [en]lightening more materially), as suggested by Shakti, aims to appropriate statist 'rural-mindedness' by promoting women's labour. Appointed by the usually all male village council (the *panchayat* romanticised by Gandhi as the model of grassroots political economy), the women are either encouraged to go out into the world on foot, working in marketing for the first time, or to turn part of their homes into a HUL bazaar selling Fair & Lovely, which they buy through credit set up by HUL, thus initiating cycles of potential indebtedness. Certainly there are complaints against Fair & Lovely amongst village women consumers: it is abrasive, it makes the skin sore; most commonly it does not work. This has direct impact on the Shakti-amm whose male supervisor, in consultation with the village panchayat and HUL distributor, insist that the Shakti-amm demonstrate how to apply the cream. In one instance this involves putting your forefingers on each cheek and making a figure of eight movement in measured succession. From an art-historical perspective, this emphasis on the performance (and possibly later the performativity) of gesture is curiously reminiscent of Ananda Coomaraswamy's long term 'fetishisation' of recording and romanticising the rhythms of the body in dance, photography (photography as dance, dance as photography) and their ancient continuum in everyday life. This rhythm allows for a kind of 'corpo-thetics' to be played out.

The micro-finance community aims to promote a 'self-help group' using the Grameen Bank, mutual thrift societies of women of which there are now six million plus groups – thus leading some journalists to term this a 'micro finance revolution'. The brainchild of Professor Muhammad Yunus of the University of Chittagong, the Grameen Bank (established 1976) aimed to provide a system of micro-credit, advancing money to the poor without requiring collateral.³³ From data available in the media it would seem that eight million families have received micro-credit in relation to Hindustan Lever marketing. Interestingly, ninety-five percent of micro-credit recipients are women. Statistics suggest that seventy-six percent of micro-credit recipients have crossed 'the poverty line'. Hindustan Lever made plans to collaborate with non-competitor companies to sell their products through the Shakti network.

THE SLIPPERINESS OF WHITE

I like to make films in which people can almost pick up gravel in their hands and rub it but at the same time, I like the film to be like a wet piece of soap – it slips out of your grasp; you have to physically move around, you have to readjust your position in relation to it, so that it dictates to you rather than you to it.
- Steve McQueen

Gender Studies scholar Rizvana Bradley writes beautifully about what she believes to be the agency of soap in relation to the 'ontological ambiguity' of the flesh of black femininity in cinema. Taking as her focus McQueen's *Twelve Years A Slave* she suggests that the gaze of the film invites a reading of erotic surplus through 'the capacity to represent a self through masks of self-negation'.³⁴ If femininity is frequently raced as white in such a way that it willingly supplements white masculinity and patriarchy. If there is a point of release this might be in terms of the ambiguity and freedom of the potentialities that labour bears within itself. Her special interest is the figure of Patsy who is flogged after she is found to have fetched a piece of soap from another plantation. The soap is less fetish than aporia in the terrible spectacle of suffering that follows. Soap instigates a voyeuristic desire for pain.

Of course, the focus on colonialism and soap is not new, as best known from Ann McClintock's convincing case for soap as border(line) fetish – that object necessarily trafficked across the volatile spaces of empire, between the domestic and the street. In both academic practice and marketing, commodity racism has not necessarily gone away.³⁵ Rather it has crystallised into a prime site for investigating the agency of things. Soap then necessarily invites grassroots economic practices. It can draw attention to the plight of the politics of the governed. To think of soap as grounding perspective, there are hints of white's slipperiness which can be said to feel out space in a slightly different register. This phenomenology of whiteness prides open the 'bad habit' of whiteness – whiteness which draws attention to whiteness in, as the world. What does it mean then to notice whiteness; 'Does speaking about whiteness allow it become an "emotional something"'? Whiteness also gains currency by being unnoticed as Sarah Ahmed argues. She proposes that 'whiteness as a category of experience that disappears as a category through experience and how this disappearance makes whiteness worldly'.³⁶ Whiteness holds within itself a strange power in that 'reification is not something we do to whiteness, but something that whiteness does, or to be more precise what allows whiteness to be done'. For Ahmed writing as an academic working in contemporary Britain, whiteness necessarily becomes lived as a background of experience – experience which draws from Husserl who relates 'this or that side' to the point of here which is described as a zero-point of orientation – ie 'the point from which the world unfolds'.³⁷ Such attraction and orientation posits whiteness as being at/to hand. The racial and historical dimensions are below the surface of the body described by phenomenology 'which become by virtue of its own orientation, a way of thinking the body that has surface appeal'.³⁸

It is still too early to say how HUL's experiment with Project Shakti brings or will bring whiteness into habitus or other notions of being. Maybe it will soon become obsolete; rotting tubes or redistributed in other places as the sachets or small tubes become unwittingly nomadic – wall paint, rubbish? The life span of an unopened sachet is after all quite long. It could be that every time the Shakti amm comes by, the sachets are hanging there, becoming almost like a kind of 'acquaintance' which might even invite a kind of hospitality. Of course, they do not occupy the same space as gods in the bazaar. The packaging is after all plain and sits within the synthetic mosaic of plastic that make up these makeshift stalls which in their plastic shininess still have a kind of wondrous *'muraqqa* quality – *'muraqqa* meant in terms of both its patchwork quality as the stall laid out as a wondrous album, sometimes towed behind a camel and in its garb as a nomadic cloak. The sellers might be on a tight circuit but there's space for fabulation – the stories around Fair and Lovely to which scholar are rarely party. There is a subaltern inaudibility that must be accounted for – an inaudibility that lacks legibility and which pertains to the realm of the mimetic, the ludic.

CONCLUSION: METACOLOUR, WHITE NOISE

Through colour I feel a deep identification with space. I am totally free. If colour is no longer pure, the drama may take on disorienting overtones. For those who don't know what it is, total freedom is

dangerous.

- Yves Klein, 'The Monochrome Adventure' Anthology of Texts (1958)

Following Klein through, Julia Kristeva claimed that colour enjoys such freedom that it is dangerous taking as her prime example the experience that one has in childhood of colour, before a sense of self is formed. This is hardly a new idea (Benjamin had suggested something similar) but she goes on to suggest that colour involves a 'shattering of unity': the chromatic unconscious at times burns too brightly. Or maybe it does not spill, burn brightly enough? Once light enters into the question of colour it becomes very difficult to tell. Maybe pure white is not achievable; it can only be luminous and grey.³⁹ The compound of the luminous and the grey is hardly fair and lovely – or is it? The notion of the compound can be turned on its side; maybe it will slide down into geology or hold up to some kind of faciality.

Grey for David Batchelor is a non-colour beyond language which is perhaps better described as a feeling, a mood, an existential condition and occasionally an insult. As scholars working with text, colour is less osmotic than we would like. The rhythm of its symbiosis as the luminous and the grey still does not make colour any easier to deal with: 'colour is an awkward presence that can make me inarticulate or render me mute... Whereof we cannot speak, thereof we must be silent'. Perhaps, as Batchelor suggests our discussions of colour can be rich and broad but they are fragmented yet at the same time colour spills.⁴⁰ This spilling as he suggests (recalling Benjamin) reflects in the asphalt puddles of the breaking streets of modernity. While so much scholarship is concerned with the obsolescence of modernity, if modernity is defined in relation to technologies like electricity, another aesthetic must be taken into consideration one which pertains to fabulation. Fabulation has its ludic lucidity even in the face of remediation.

Remediation need not be all about contemporary technologies as the NIV show shows. White on White of course opens its own largely feminised politics of whiteness (the artists all wore white to the opening or for the duration of the show, as did I). But how invidious white is, is difficult to say. To return home, to unravel your sari and to switch off the light, perhaps to feel whiteners seep into your skin; is this to feel white(r)? My two cases suggest entangled silences of an underlying chromophilia which however disparate they may be can be considered to be plateaus vibrating, perhaps to be (ominously) vibrant.

For Sukanya Garg, silence in a kind of Bergsonian sense has become the vibrant 'ground' for/of her poetry:

The leaping silence,
Manoeuvring through the maze of my mind,
Drawing blinds on the windowpanes of my retina,
Intoxicating my breath,
Drumming down my ears,
Discolouring the blush of my cheeks,
Gluing together my already pursed lips,
Knotting up my throat,
Ornamenting the dip between my collar bones,
Diving down my shoulders,
Traversing my arms and settling in the spaces between my fingers,
Ebbing the rising tide of my bosom,
Sinking down deep in the valves of my heart,
Inflaming my lungs...⁴¹

If white is dissonant, vibrant, monadic, toxic, it is also the space for, in, of, the kind of scratchy (or itchy) inaudibility of white noise. Whiteness steps in, with, up to, and maybe is a supplement to the state as a practice perhaps where politics have failed. Its fabulation also transgresses any kind of familiar politics of the governed. Art and politics, perhaps at this time of writing, for those wanting to enter any kind of public sphere are best seen as White Noise. White Noise whose scrubby audibility is yet to be known.

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¹ Brian Massumi 'Introduction', in eds, Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and schizophrenia*, Continuum, London, 1988, p xiv

² J W von Goethe, *Theory of Colours*, London, 1810, p 23

³ Michael Taussig, *That Colour is the Sacred?*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2009

- ⁴ See David Batchelor, *Chromophobia*, Reaktion, London, 2000
- ⁵ Michael Taussig, *Mimesis and Alterity: A particular History of the Senses*, Routledge, New York, 1993
- ⁶ Arun Saldanha, *Psychedelic White: Rave Tourism and the Materiality of Race in Goa*, Open University Press, 2004
- ⁷ Sadan Jha, *Reverence, Resistance and Politics of Seeing the Indian National Flag*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2016; Natasha Eaton, *Colour, Art and Empire: The Nomadism of Representation*, IB Tauris, London, 2013
- ⁸ Carolyn L Kane, *Chromatic Algorithms: Synthetic Colour, Computer Art and Aesthetics After Codes*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2014, p 123. It goes without saying that now we are forced into using certain automated palettes and pre-set interfaces whilst being faced with the relentless online rhetoric that these colours are 'true'. Techo-teleology it seems knows no bounds through the lingua franca of 'transparency'.
- ⁹ The Aditya Birla Group is a multi-conglomerate named after Aditya Vikram Birla based in Mumbai, established by Seth Shiv Narayan Birla in 1857. It owns mines in Australia and an aluminium mill in the UK. After the purchase of Columbian Chemicals Co Birla is now the largest manufacturer of carbon black worldwide – as well as viscose. While Birla is listed as number three in India's industrial multi-conglomerates, Tata is number one. Like Birla, Tata has its HQ in Mumbai and it is also an old company – being founded in 1861 by Jamsetji Tata. Its annual revenue 2014–2015 was 108.7 billion dollars.
- ¹⁰ Carbon Black is registered as PBL-7 in the Colour Index International. It is produced by the incomplete combustion of heavy petroleum.
- ¹¹ This is the once secret garden created by road worker Nek Chand on disused ground in the centre of Chandigarh.
- ¹² Briony Fer, 'Eva Hesse and Colour', *October*, Winter 2007, 119, p 33.
- ¹³ Denis Vidal, 'When the Gods Drink Milk! Empiricism and Belief in Contemporary Hinduism', *South Asia Research* 18, September 1998, pp 149–171
- ¹⁴ This is an excerpt from Rashmi Khurana, 'Sufi can dance anywhere'. The poem exists separately from the work and was available as a print out in the gallery rather than being attached as wall text.
- ¹⁵ This white robe is superseded by the supra-lunar realm when you can wear a blue robe the colour of the sky. If you are able to pass through all stages of the Mystical Path you can wear a multi-coloured or variegated robe (khirqa-yi nua'amma'a). This appears to be a reading from Najim Kobra (d 1220) but many other readings.
- ¹⁶ The colours discussed explicitly in the Quran are white, black, red, green and yellow.
- ¹⁷ Personal correspondence, 2016
- ¹⁸ Kajri Jain, *Gods in the Bazaar: The Economies of Indian Calendar Art*, Duke University Press, Durham, 2007
- ¹⁹ Jacques Derrida, *Given Time: Counterfeit Money*, Peggy Kamuf, trans, Routledge, New York, 1995
- ²⁰ Now called Hindustan Unilever, the company is owned by the Anglo-Dutch firm Unilever who control sixty-seven per cent of the company's shares. Unilever was established in 1933. Its Indian headquarters are in Mumbai.
- ²¹ Christopher Pinney, *Camera Indica: The Social Life of Indian Photographs*, Reaktion, London, 1997
- ²² www.fairandlovely.in 'The effect is reversible. The skin will return to its original tone in a few weeks, once you discontinue to use the product.'
- ²³ Anti-skin whitening campaigners have taken to Facebook with the campaign 'No steroids on face.'
- ²⁴ Possible side effects include facial hair growth, postular lesions, facial rashes, redness and skin thinning.
- ²⁵ Skin whitening products are banned in the Ivory Coast and in South Africa.

- ²⁶ India has the world's third highest rate of obesity – an indication of the westernised food culture of the middle classes.
- ²⁷ Village remedies include lemon juice, rosewater, honey, egg yolk, cream, cumin, chick pea gram flour mix. During pregnancy some women eat saffron believing that it will lighten the unborn baby's complexion.
- ²⁸ Roger Caillois, 'Mimicry and Legendary Psychasthenia', *October*, winter, 1984, pp 16–32
- ²⁹ Bhaskar Mukhopadhyay, *The Rumour of Globalization: Desecrating the Global from Vernacular Margins*, Hurst, London, 2011, p 27, has little interest in non-statist mass movements such as Gandhian anarchism.
- ³⁰ Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin White Masks* [1952], Penguin, London, 1989, p 4
- ³¹ Mukhopadhyay's method looks for 'the vernacular as objet trouve', slight fieldwork and 'powers of the false', ie those kind of stories that cannot be found in the official archive; Mukhopadhyay, *Rumour of Globalization*, op cit, p 27.
- ³² Shaktimaans are typically the husbands or brothers of the Shakti ammas. While there are around 70,000 shakti ammas there are forty-eight shatkimaans. Hindustan Lever estimates that together they cover 162 villages and four million rural households.
- ³³ The bank was authorised by national legislation as an independent bank in 1983. The Grameen Bank and its founder Professor Yunus were awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2006.
- ³⁴ Rizvana Bradley, 'Reinventing Capacity: Black Femininity's Lyrical Surplus and the Cinematic Limits of Twelve Years A Slave', *Black Cinema*, vol 7, no 1, autumn 2015, pp 161–178, p 171
- ³⁵ Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Context*, Duke University Press, Durham, 1995
- ³⁶ Sara Ahmed, 'A Phenomenology of Whiteness', *Feminist Theory*, vol 8, no 2, 2007, pp 149–168, 153
- ³⁷ Ahmed, Phenomenology, op cit, p 161
- ³⁸ Ibid
- ³⁹ David Batchelor, *The Luminous and the Grey*, Reaktion, London, 2014
- ⁴⁰ Ibid, p 15, p 16
- ⁴¹ Personal correspondence, 2016



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