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# RGB: You and Me (A Queer, Feminist Analysis of Emotion, Affect, and Materiality within Google Images)

## Megan Bigelow

Abstract: RGB: You and Me is a visual and textual project based on the intersections of representation, color, popular imagery, hegemony, affect, and the social, situated within Google Image searches and Wikipedia. Drawing upon the work of Luciana Parisi, Robin James, Jamie “Skye” Bianco, and Charles W. Mills, I will argue that these colors and suggested related terms illustrate how technology and images both reify and reinforce dominant ideological norms—through the enmeshment of technologies and bodies—and propose that a queer, feminist, material consideration of these effects within the framework of affect theory has implications for ethical projects and theorizing from spaces such as in-betweens and what Parisi deems ‘incomputables’.

In August 2012, I took each of the 70 emotions listed in the Wikipedia entry for ‘emotion’ and ran each individual emotion (‘happiness’ for example) through a Google Image search, saving the first 25 images for each emotion. I then used Photoshop’s RGB ‘average’ tool on each of the 25 individual images. This tool finds the average color of an image containing many individual pixels of color and returns one solid average color for that image. I then composed a 5 x 5 grid for each emotion, so that each square within the grids represents one of the 25 images. I also included the ‘suggested related searches’ that Google Images provides for each emotion, which appear in parentheses after the title of each grid.

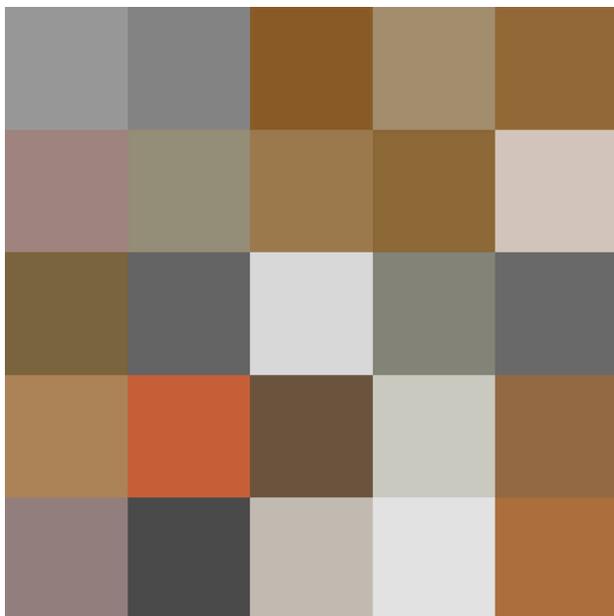
The grids then reveal color palette patterns across the 25 individual images for each specific emotion, allowing both the associated colors and the related terms to be seen as they are algorithmically structured. These evince the hegemonic, dominant norms of color associated with these popular representations of both the image and the emotion itself.

The entire series of grids and suggested related terms may be viewed at:

<http://meganbigelow.com/rgb-you-and-me>

These colors within algorithmically generated representations of the image and emotions are not only tailored to my web history and data profile; they are also situated within larger systemic social forces of race, gender, power, sexuality, and more.

Technology is never neutral with regard to these systems, but is one of many conduits for such forces.



For example, the ‘Affection’ grid contains many browns due to the number of images in the ‘Affection’ search which depicted lions and cheetahs in affectionate poses. The related search terms were ‘public display of affection’, and ‘showing affection’.

(<http://adareview.fembotcollective.org/files/2014/03/Affection-2.jpg>)

*Affection (suggested related searches: “public display of affection”, “showing affection”)*

As brown is sometimes considered to be a ‘warm’ color, one formulation from among the many that may be drawn out of the analysis of these

images, colors and rhetoric is a consideration of how the material, bodily response of viewing a ‘warm’ color in the context of affectionate poses by sentient, emotive members of non-human species relates to ethical and social projects.

As in: how might such bio-intimacies function within queer, feminist approaches to ethical projects such as those that work to dismantle systems of oppression, decenter white heteropatriarchy, and critically and ontologically think through the formation of emotional and subject-assembling relations between human and non-human animals?

Other noteworthy details from the grids include the ‘Anger’ grid, which is mostly composed of red and pink hues, recalling the association of red with anger. Euphoria is largely purple, owing to how almost all of the images returned were of a purple colored perfume bottle, Calvin Klein’s Euphoria. The Desire grid is composed almost entirely of stock images of a cellular phone, HTC’s “Desire” model.

In a similar way to how the networked, algorithmic processes that designate which images are returned as the first 25 in the Google Image search—processes themselves embedded and enmeshed within the same sociality and culture generating the images

—I also sought to recall how emotions themselves are socially and culturally produced through interaction with others and within social networks.

What relations exist between the thousands of images viewed each day across multiple contexts, perceptions, affects, and their interactions as they are situated within larger social systems of power, gender, race, sexuality, and bodily capacities? In turn, how do these also relate to the establishment of emotional norms?

Additionally, the list of emotions in the Wikipedia entry changes constantly. As of this writing, some of the emotions depicted in this project are no longer listed on the page, and others have since been added. As of April 2014, the emotions that were added were confidence, courage, outrage, relief, and self-confidence, while boldness and fearlessness have been removed. These elements also recall the mutable, ever-shifting elements of emotion, culture, and the social.

Drawing upon the work of Robin James, Jamie “Skye” Bianco, Charles W. Mills, and Luciana Parisi, I will discuss how these colors and suggested related terms exemplify how technology and images function as both conduits and reinforcements of dominant ideologies. This occurs through the material intersections and enmeshment of technology and the bodies of viewers as they both search for and consequently view the colors and suggested related search terms associated with the original emotion they searched for.

Drawing upon James’s (2013) work in particular, here the images, colors, and the technology of Google Images itself used to access them both reinforces and propagates dominant ideological norms. Again, technology itself is never neutral; it exists enmeshed in and among the many modes of the reproduction of hegemonic culture, norms, and beliefs. I will conclude with a consideration of the implications of these ideas within ethical projects situated within queer, feminist frameworks.

In considering the relation between color, the affective result of the palette for each grid, and the sociocultural content of both the original source images and the resultant grids—how do these entities exist in relation to the material changes and differences between the grids and the bodies of viewers of the grids? What potential exists in this space?

How does color relate to biological and sociocultural responses in viewers whose bodies are always already situated within material systems of power and oppression? How do

both the original colors in the first 25 returned images and the palette of the grid composed of these first 25 images returned within the search function—through the bodies of the viewers—as conduits for systemic social forces of gender, power, sexuality and bodily capacities?

Finally, what might a queer, materialist, embodied feminist approach to and critique of epistemic norms involve? What sort of a productive ethics of desire might it produce?

I'm interested in how these elements, concepts, and colors are experienced affectively, a concept defined by Patricia T. Clough (2007) as

*a substrate of potential bodily responses, in excess of consciousness . . . [and the] bodily capacities to affect and be affected or the augmentation or diminution of a body's capacity to act, to engage, and to connect, such that autoaffectation is linked to the self-feeling of being alive—that is, aliveness or vitality?* In this conceptualization, affect is not only theorized in terms of the human body. Affect is also theorized in relation to the technologies that are allowing us to both 'see' affect and to produce affective bodily capacities beyond the body's organic-physiological constraints. The technoscientific experimentation with affect not only traverses the opposition of the organic and the non-organic; it also inserts the technical into felt vitality, the felt aliveness given in the pre-individual bodily capacities to act, to engage, and connect—to affect and be affected. (Clough 2007, p.2).

The understanding of the material, bodily effects of viewing these images and colors as conduits for hegemonic ideologies must include in its relation the material enmeshment of bodies and technologies and the underlying social systems that shape them. James, in 'Oppression, Privilege, and Aesthetics', contends that the aesthetic is a powerful realm for the flow of such entities:

*Patriarchy, white privilege, and heteronormativity are interlocking systems of privilege and oppression. These systems are deeply embedded in the West's most abstract reaches (e.g., philosophical concepts) and its most concrete, material realities (e.g., human bodies). The aesthetic is a particularly charged point of transfer between the 'abstract' and 'concrete aspects of systemic privilege and oppression. Thus, both 'the aesthetic' as such, and the specific concepts from aesthetics (e.g., the visual, disgust, or beauty), can be used to examine the relationship between patriarchy, white privilege, and heteronormativity as systems, on the one hand, and gendered, raced, sexually-oriented bodies, on the other. (James 2013, p. 103)*

*Though aesthetic concepts may seem to be neutral with respect to race, gender, and sexuality, and have nothing to do with politics or inequality at all, they only appear neutral because they conform to hegemonic norms. In other words: aesthetics' apparent neutrality is actually evidence of its centering of whiteness and heteromascularity, to say nothing of bodily and cognitive "ability," etc. (James 2013, p. 111)*

### 'Boldness'



([https://adanewmedia.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/Bigelow\\_Bold.png](https://adanewmedia.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/Bigelow_Bold.png))

*suggested related terms for 'boldness' were "boldness quote,' 'boldness symbol,' 'holy boldness,' 'being bold,' 'truculent,' and 'vehemently'"*

The term 'holy boldness,' with its appeal to the patriarchal, transcendent authority of the Bible, is particularly noteworthy when considering both the overall blue colors in the Boldness grid, and the relation of the dominant association of the color blue with traditional forms of masculinity, such as its popular association with infants who are assigned male at birth. How might other 'active' search terms such as 'vehemently' relate to the notion of blue as a 'traditional' color for infants assigned male at birth and other normative systems, such as white heteropatriarchal masculinity?

James, again:

*Aesthetic arguments gain legitimacy, consistency, and credibility by participating in gendered (or raced or sexualized) systems of organization. A theory of beauty consistent with broader cultural logistics of gender and race is granted greater credibility and plausibility than one that is inconsistent with white*



*heteropatriarchal norms. (James 2013, p. 110)*

(<http://adareview.fembotcollective.org/files/2014/03/Jealousy-2.jpg>)

James's arguments are particularly relevant here when considering the source images for the 'Jealousy' grid:

*suggested related searches: "jealousy face", "jealousy quotes", "jealousy funny", "jealousy motivational poster", "green eyed monster"*

fully half of the source images (12 out of 25) for 'Jealousy' depicted jealousy as a triangulation between three bodies. 11 out of these 12 images depicted a white male/white female couple embracing or showing affection; the 'jealous' third party was represented as a white female. The sole image which depicted a man as the jealous third party consisted of an image of a white man and an Asian woman walking away in the foreground, arm in arm, from an Asian man who was positioned in the background.

Other examples of the relation of color, culture, and bodily affect can be seen in the 'Anger' grid which is mostly reds and pinks, recalling the association of red with anger. The suggested related terms for anger were 'anger management', 'anger art', 'anger cartoon', 'funny anger', and 'angry face'.

A feminist examination of the first suggested related term, 'anger management', might entail considering which bodies (as assembled subjectifications) are allowed the free expression of anger and which are not. How would a consideration of the rhetorical and epistemic violences of implicit bias inhered in stereotypes such as those of 'angry feminists' or 'angry black women' relate to which images are returned for a Google Image search for 'anger management'? How do power and oppression flow through these images and consequently relate to and reinforce the ongoing stratification of such permissible expressions of anger?



(<http://adareview.fembotcollective.org/files/2014/03/Anger-2.jpg>)

*Anger (suggested related searches: "anger management", "anger art", "anger cartoon", "funny anger", "angry face")*

Charles W. Mills (2005, p.166) contrasts ideal and non-ideal theory. Mills defines ‘ideal’ theory:

*In a trivial sense, ‘ideal’ theory applies to moral theory as a whole (at least to normative ethics as against metaethics). Since ethics deals by definition with normative/prescriptive/evaluative issues, as against factual/descriptive issues, and so involves the appeal to values and ideals, it is obviously ideal theory in that generic sense, regardless of any divergence in approaches taken. Call this uncontroversial background normative sense of the ideas, which with we will not be concerned: ideal-as-normative (emphasis mine).*

Mills continues, detailing non-ideal theory:

*The crucial common claim—whether couched in terms of ideology and fetishism, or androcentrism, or white normativity—is that all theorizing, both moral and nonmoral, takes place in an intellectual realm dominated by concepts, assumptions, norms, values, and framing perspectives that reflect the experience and group interests of the privileged group (whether the bourgeoisie, or men, or whites). So a simple empiricism will not work as a cognitive strategy; one has to be self-conscious about the concepts that ‘spontaneously’ occur to one, since many of these concepts will not arise naturally but as the result of social structures and hegemonic ideational patterns. In particular, it will often be the case that dominant concepts will obscure certain crucial realities, blocking them from sight, or naturalizing (emphasis mine) them, while on the other hand, concepts necessary for accurately mapping these realities will be absent (emphasis mine). Whether in terms of concepts of the self, or of humans in general, or in the cartography of the social, it will be necessary to scrutinize the dominant conceptual tools and the ways boundaries are drawn. (Mills 2005, p.175)*

I find the conceptualization of non-ideal theory proposed by Mills (2005) particularly relevant here in considering which boundaries are being drawn, delineated, and represented as ‘my’ particular algorithmic result within Google’s search functions, and, consequently, which boundaries are naturalized and which boundaries are absent, as evinced by the color in the grids and the original set of 25 images returned from the search.

James, again:

*There are several ways interpretive horizons and orientations use the ‘aesthetic’ to open out issues of privilege and oppression. Because they are ‘nonlinguistic’ and non-propositional, we can and oftentimes do learn horizons/orientations through encounters with works of art: by watching film and television, by listening to*

*music, by dancing, etc. Aesthetic norms are 'pedagogies' of privilege and oppression.' (James 2013, p.106)*

Though here my analysis is limited to the searches present in this project, I find James's notion of aesthetic norms as pedagogies to be particularly useful in thinking of the bodily, material implications in terms of privilege and oppressions of any Google Image search, as well as in thinking about the material implications for bodies viewing the results (not just those pertaining to the emotions as listed by Wikipedia).

For instance, we may ask: what relations, what pedagogies exist between the thousands of images viewed each day across multiple contexts and the perceptions, affects, and interactions as they are situated within larger social systems of power, gender, race, sexuality, and bodily capacities? When discussing non-ideal theory, Mills (2005, p.175) reminds us that "dominant concepts will obscure certain crucial realities, blocking them from sight, or naturalizing (emphasis mine) them, while on the other hand, concepts necessary for accurately mapping these realities will be absent".

So how might we recognize obscurity or even absence of such concepts to be an entry point for productive considerations about an ethics of spaces-in-between?

Affect theory and Parisi's notion of 'incomputables', particularly as they relate to queer, feminist, embodied practices and the consideration of the preindividual, preconscious, autonomic responses and shifts in relation to culture, the social, and the larger systems of power and oppression which shape all bodies both, offer possible entry points.

In *Contagious Architecture: Computation, Aesthetics, and Space*, Parisi notes that "structural changes in programming are not negligible, but are in fact ontological expressions of culture and power" (Parisi 2013, p. 87). In "The Adventures of a Sex" from *Deleuze and Queer Theory*, she offers a theory of incomputable materialities:

*The space in which atoms relate to each other is infinitely divisible yet continuous, a fuzzy quantity, an inexact cipher, an incomputable materiality, which is nonetheless held-together by virtual populations at the interval from one transition to another, entering singular composition, folding inside out according to certain pressures, gradients, inflections. (Parisi 2009, p. 82).*

I contend that these certain pressures, gradients, and inflections affect and shape the algorithms in Google Image searches, and underscore James's argument concerning the "relationship between patriarchy, white privilege, and heteronormativity as systems, on

the one hand, and gendered, raced, sexually-oriented bodies, on the other”. (James 2013, p. 103)

Bianco, in ‘Queer Urban Composites: Any City or “Bellona (After Samuel R. Delany),”’ from *Ada 3: Feminist Science Fiction*, speaks wonderfully:

*There is no outside, no slow, clear space of objectivity from which our critical discoveries may reveal a sustaining and sustainable truth. We are captured inside the procedurality of cross-mediation, queerly practicing, consciously or not, a digi-  
logics of affective analysis – the motions of making, of what I call queer creative critical compositionism. In this milieu, several things should be clear to the (post)humanist in the digital age, to the digital (post)humanist, and to the digital media practitioner: 1) the issues of computational and digital media literacies today are comparable to the issue of alphabetic literacy in the 19th century; 2) the critical function in digital media is creative and aesthetic as well as technical and works through affect and design, and as such, we must become modular scholars, makers, and coders; and, 3) affect and non-discursivity demand our immediate queer “analytics of attention.”*

Bianco’s notion that there is no outside and no objectivity underscores the importance of a queer, feminist ethos . I suggest that such ethos might place into relation Mills’s discussion of non-ideal theory, James’s notion of the aesthetic as pedagogy, Parisi’s notion of incomputables and spaces in-between, and the subsequent interactions with and implications for bodies, technology, and their lived materialities and desires.

Parisi:

*For a philosophy of immanent desire to become relevant to queer theory, sexuality has to be housed by intensive spatio-temporal regions expressing the how, how much, when of the becomings of sex. Sexuality is not the ultimate order of the symbolic but the desire primarily implicated in the abstract feeling of what happens to the world, when mental, affective, social, aesthetic assemblages transversally combined across all scales of matter, deploy the singular engineering of each world as an event, a pure occurrence of sex. (Parisi 2009, p. 87).*

Taking up Parisi’s concept of incomputables, of “each world as an event”, it is within and from these indeterminate spaces—with the pre-individual, with the in-between, and with the wild fabrics of that which cannot be computed and calculated—that I suggest are spaces from which immanent, ethical, minoritarian projects might theorize.

It is within these spaces that potential rests. Potential and its relation to indeterminacy-itself may produce an ethos, an ethics not of dualist, binary, totalizing, moralizing categorical imperatives, but one of wildly productive, Deleuzian desiring-machines.

Indeterminacy as potential and as productive ethics, is situated within the given – yet striving towards the wild unknown of factors; always flowing, always in relation, always containing the possibility for new worlds, new ‘yets’.

Desire-itself is a desire that exists and flows through spaces in between normative ideals and prescriptions.

Parisi:

*Deleuze and Guattari suggest that abstraction only entails the primacy of complete assemblages, the gelling together of pre-individualities, a felt continuum that embeds discrete bodies within a field growing by its edges, adding and subtracting components: an ontogenetic process in which all elements play a part and yet no element can form a whole. The abstract machine entails an engineering patchwork of partialities passing from one state to another, fusing and breaking into each other, and yet belonging-together at points of transitions, which are less irreducible dots than inflections, critical thresholds, curvatures of imperceptible continuities. In other words, an abstract machine entails a mathematical topology of matter, whereby beneath the continuity and discontinuity of forms and substances, expressions and contents, entire populations of passional signs grow by connections. (Parisi 2009, p. 81)*

From this field and with the wild fabrics of that which cannot be computed and calculated—what new connections might be formed? What new colors might be assembled? What new tools might be made? What old tools might be broken, repurposed, reframed, tinkered with, and reformulated to create new affects, new percepts, new concepts, new experiences—“entire populations of passional signs” (Parisi, 2009, p. 81)?

How will these engage temporality, as the deep enmeshment of culture, hegemony, technology, bodies, and sexuality continues to enfold within multiple media?

Desire-itself, a desire that exists, seeping, and flows

through

the spaces

in

between . . .

## References

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**Megan Bigelow** (<https://adanewmedia.org/author/meganbigelow>)

Megan Bigelow is an artist and scholar who works with bodies, texts, objects, concepts, and media from a queer, feminist perspective, approaching art as a relational event between artist, viewer, artwork, and the flow of affects between these assemblages. Some of her artistic and research interests include affect, immanence, color, bodies, subjectivity, topology, sexuality, temporality, and power. She received her BFA in Photography from the Massachusetts College of Art and is currently an MA candidate in Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies at the CUNY Graduate Center.



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