



Book Review

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1–3

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Anna Watkins Fisher, *Safety Orange*. University of Minnesota Press:
Minneapolis, MN, 2021; 98 pp.; ISBN: 978-1-5179-1339-7, \$10.00 (hbk)

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Are traffic cones, the United States Homeland Security Advisory System, the 2020 California wildfires, and prison jumpsuits all keys to understanding our current moment? Only if you understand Safety Orange, a bureaucratic color standard established in the 1950s by the U.S. National Safety Council, argues Anna Watkins Fisher. Chosen for its high visibility and synthetic appearance, the fluorescent tint conveys warning and caution by alerting individuals to hazardous or risky physical conditions. In her slim yet forceful volume of the same name, Fisher treats Safety Orange as an “interpretive key,” asserting, “If the U.S. cultural present were a color, it would be Safety Orange” (p. ix). Defined by economic precarity, perpetual terrorist threat, climate change, mass incarceration, and a global pandemic that shows no signs of subsiding, the 21st-century American public sphere is both figuratively and literally saturated in this lurid hue. Written in punchy, at times manifesto-like prose, *Safety Orange* traces how a color standard intended to promote safety has come to signify its exact opposite: crisis, alarm, and imminent danger. The result is a thought-provoking and damning treatise on the visual and cultural logic of neoliberalism that will hit close to home for most readers, for whom navigating this “new abnormal” has become an exhausting aspect of daily existence.

Fisher begins by pointing to the collective waning of focus and decreased cognitive capacity characteristic of today’s attention economy, where Safety Orange paradoxically draws attention to itself while camouflaging into the background due to its sheer ubiquity. Citing similar concerns about attention, labor, and self-management as critics such as Jonathan Crary (2013) and Neta Alexander (2017) academic-adjacent works like Jenny Odell’s (2019) *How to Do Nothing*, the book’s introduction describes how the color’s hypervisibility attracts attention without communicating any clear message. Much like “slippery when wet” signs, which alert pedestrians to danger but provide no concrete instructions as to how to manage said danger, Safety Orange’s efficacy stems from its ability to disrupt rather than from any particular meaning.

This “direction and misdirection of attention” is one of the color’s many inherent contradictions, which also include “its protection and endangerment of bodies” and “its raising and normalizing of alarm” (p. xvi). Following the logic of traffic warnings, where drivers often interpret yellow as “speed up” rather than “slow down,” Safety Orange’s ambiguous signification stems from its in-between nature: it is “less a gradient of a red than it is a *strategic forestallment of red*” (p. 21). In this sense, orange, as opposed to yellow or red, is the shade best suited to a political climate in which alarm and crisis are ubiquitous rather than noteworthy. Invoking the George W. Bush administration’s color-coded Homeland Security Advisory System (2002–2011), in which Code Orange signified “high risk” of terrorist attack, Fisher observes that for 9 years, the system’s threat level stayed at orange almost the entire time (p. 9). Throughout *Safety Orange*, “the new normal”—a phrase that has become all too commonplace since January 2020—is replaced with its less accepting counterpart *the new abnormal*, recalling today’s collective experience of alarm that is characterized by chronic fatigue and ambivalence rather than action.

The post-9/11 US landscape reveals how crisis has become not “simply imminent, but, paradoxically, *chronically imminent*” (p. 5). In revealing how Safety Orange naturalizes emergency and danger as permanent fixtures of a media-saturated society, the book engages with theorists such as Mary Ann Doane and Wendy Hui Kyong Chun who have written on the relation of crisis and catastrophe to time. Whereas Doane’s (2006 [1988]) influential “Information, Crisis, Catastrophe” (republished in 2006 with a 9/11 post-script) and Chun’s (2011) “Crisis, Crisis, Crisis, or Sovereignty and Networks,” a direct response to Doane, focus on live television and digital media, respectively, Fisher treats Safety Orange itself as a medium. 24/7 newsfeeds and real-time data visualizations ranging from COVID-19 contagion maps and heat indexes to color-coded emergency alerts remind us to be constantly vigilant while providing no concrete solutions, trapping media users in a constant state of “crisis paralysis” (p. 6). Such interactive technologies are perfectly suited to neoliberal forms of governance that encourage individuals to assess their own levels of risk by framing this self-regulation in terms of personal “choice.” Across these visual forms, Safety Orange acts as a patchwork solution for failing infrastructure in the absence of actual systemic change.

The most compelling part of the book, titled “Orange is the New Profiling Technology,” examines how Safety Orange marks which bodies are and are not deserving of care, where the same color that acts as a protective measure in certain contexts (e.g. life jackets, construction gear, etc.) singles out racialized bodies to be disciplined and surveilled in others. In the case of the orange prison jumpsuit, color “can thus signify either lack privilege or lack of privilege, as its referent changes with the color of the body that wears it” (p. 42). Citing contemporary Black artists such as David Hammons, William Pope.L., and Cameron Rowland, who explore the relationship between Safety Orange and the incarcerated Black body in their work, Fisher points to the ways in which these artists effectively defamiliarize skin color as an index of race by focusing on so-called “abstract” color. They thus reveal the ways in which carceral capitalism decouples racial violence from Blackness by employing a supposedly “neutral” color that bears no resemblance to skin tone (p. 44). In this way, Fisher’s approach to color resembles those of scholars who explicitly link American color standards to

white supremacist power structures, though she does not cite them. The book's short length makes it difficult to engage fully with a field as vast and interdisciplinary as color studies, so interested readers should not miss Carolyn L. Kane's (2014) *Chromatic Algorithms*, Nicholas Gaskill's (2018) *Chromographia*, Michael Rossi's (2019) *The Republic of Color*, and Susan Murray's (2019) *Bright Signals*. Still, *Safety Orange* is an incisive and timely history of the present that will likely ring true in conversations about safety, care, and precarity for years to come.

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