



View. Theories and Practices of Visual Culture

title:

Blue and Red Make Black. Re-Membering Black Ecologies as Patchy Ecologies

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source:

View. Theories and Practices of Visual Culture 40 (2024)

URL:

<https://www.pismowidok.org/en/archive/2024/40-black-ecologies/blue-and-red-make-black>

doi:

<https://doi.org/10.36854/widok/2024.40.2985>

publisher:

Widok. Foundation for Visual Culture

affiliation:

SWPS University

University of Warsaw

keywords:

Black ecologies; the patchy Anthropocene; patchy ecologies; Burgundian black

abstract:

The article revisits the dominant discourse of Black ecologies (Roane and Hosbey), a transdisciplinary field of study that analyses intricate historical and contemporary relationships between the systemic colonial violence towards Black bodies and the escalating eco-ecocrisis. Whereas Black ecologies focus on colonial eco-social projects that affect one subaltern group, drawing on the work of Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, the article argues that Black ecologies are always patchy ecologies: mosaics of unexpected and often contingent encounters between different, seemingly distant, ecological phenomena and marginalized bodies living in the wake of European colonialism. To substantiate the concept of patchy ecologies, the article analyses performative projects that mobilize the colorants of colonial provenance, predominantly indigo and cochineal, that have been historically used to obtain the Burgundian black, from Late Medieval to the Early Modern period regarded by the European higher classes as the highest-quality black to wear. The projects are interpreted as embodied practices of re-membering (Barad) that constantly re-configure the past in order to posit new, more sustainable futures. First of all, the project Burgundian Black Collaboratory (2019) by the Dutch textile artist and designer Claudy Jongstra is analyzed as it reworks historical dyeing recipes as an alternative to contemporary ecologically detrimental synthetic dyes. Secondly, the ongoing project Electric Dub Station (2020 –) by the Panamanian-Dutch artist Jose Antonio Guzman and Serbian textile designer Ana Jankovic is scrutinized as it mobilizes indigo and foregrounds deep interconnections between the Burgundian black and Black suffering under the Atlantic slave trade. Finally, the article looks closely at the installation *The System for a Stain* (2016) by the American-Chinese artist Candice Lin which demonstrates that the Burgundian black is also intertwined with the story of Indigenous peoples of Mexico.

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Blue and Red Make Black. Re-Membering Black Ecologies as Patchy Ecologies

From Black Ecologies to Patchy Ecologies

In recent environmental humanities, we have witnessed the emergence of a new transdisciplinary research field known as Black ecologies. The field puts spotlight on close entanglements between the exploitation of Black enslaved bodies and the destruction of environments, which have their roots in the legacy of European colonialisms. Popularized by experts in human geography, J. T. Roane and Justin Hosbey, the term “Black ecologies” embraces various transdisciplinary discourses and practices that aim to “historiciz[e] and analyz[e] the ongoing reality that Black communities in the US South and in the wider African Diaspora are most susceptible to the effects of climate change.”¹ However, Black ecologies do not merely scrutinize the intricate historical and contemporary relationships between the systemic colonial violence toward Black bodies and the escalating eco-ecocrisis. They serve a clear tactical or even political purpose. Indeed, Black ecologies directly rely on the work of Nathan Hare, the African American sociologist and activist. In the 1960s and 1970s, Hare engaged in the Black Power movement, actively supporting the self-determination of Black people in the U.S. In his seminal essay “Black Ecology” (1970), Hare criticized mainstream environmental movements for their embroilment in white bourgeoisie sensibility.² Within this sensibility, Black bodies were still considered another type of pollution. White communities only began to protest against the environmental destruction when they realized that the suburbia would soon become as devastated as the Black ghettos. Therefore, not surprisingly, Hare argued that attending to the interrelated environmental crisis and the Black ordeal necessitated “the

decolonization of the black race.”³ Hare thought primarily about the insurgent struggle against the internal colonization, namely the exploitation of the resources and labor of the Black U.S. citizens to sustain white liveability. Drawing and expanding on this theorization, contemporary Black ecologies also refer to the corpus of various Black communities’ insurgent knowledge to forge new ways of thinking about the ongoing ecological predicament and visions of sustainable futures.

Nevertheless, the most recent studies, also within the field itself, challenge the dominant approaches to Black ecologies by stressing the necessity to better account for dynamic, often contingent relations between different subjected bodies—Black and Non-black, enslaved and free—and their environments. For instance, social geographers Alex A. Moulton and Inge Salo suggest such a necessity. In their review of Black ecologies literature, they succinctly observe that it still narrowly focuses on the experiences of black communities in the U.S., especially in the American South.⁴ Black environmental scholars have only recently delved into Black ecologies in the Caribbean, let alone scrutinized the intersections between Black and Indigenous ecologies across the Americas.⁵ Following Moulton and Salo’s suggestions, one can sketch out at least three trajectories that these extensions may follow. First, they might go outside North and Central America to elucidate the hardships of African enslaved peoples in other colonial arrangements, for example in South America and Asia, which remain marginal within environmental historical accounts. Second, they might show that the ecological hardship of Black enslaved people inextricably linked to wider colonial trajectories of planetary reach. Suffice it to mention the less-known Indian Ocean slave trade, in which Black enslaved people were transported along the Eastern coast of Africa to Middle East and Southeast Asia. Third, they might instigate a new dynamic and intersectional approach to Black ecologies, taking

into consideration gender and class situatedness of subjected bodies, which would also necessitate a radical revision of the term itself. Otherwise, the discourse of Black ecologies, especially when supported by scholars from British and American universities that still hold a hegemonic position in Western academia, risks essentializing and universalizing Black suffering. Thus, this may overshadow forms of colonial violence and oppression toward other subaltern groups, not only Indigenous but also peasant and working class populations. In effect, the diversity and specificity of colonial eco-social projects will become reduced to a story of one subaltern group.

In this article, I aim to enrich the field of Black ecologies by showing that they already belong to a much larger and more diverse field that I call patchy ecologies: mosaics of unexpected and often contingent encounters between different, often seemingly distant ecological phenomena and marginalized bodies living in the wake of European colonialism. Patchy ecologies directly draw on the work of the American anthropologist Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing. In her latest work *Field Guide to the Patchy Anthropocene*, written together with Jennifer Deger, Alder Keleman Saxena, and Feifei Zhou, Lowenhaupt Tsing returns to the concept of “the patchy Anthropocene” that she introduced over a decade ago to challenge the dominant way of thinking about the Anthropocene as a primarily planetary phenomenon.⁶ In her article “Earth Stalked by Man,” she argues that the new epoch in Earth history is simultaneously planetary and local.⁷ Although it only makes sense at the scale of the planet, it is made up by “patches” where anthropogenic environmental changes actually happen, and “exists only in and through those patches.”⁸ Lowenhaupt Tsing borrows the term “patch” from landscape ecology, an interdisciplinary field dedicated to studying environments as multidimensional systems comprised of multiple interrelated components. The components include not only heterogenous forms of terrain, fauna, and flora—which constitute

traditional subjects of Life and Earth studies—but also historically situated ways of shaping the landscapes by humans, typically studied by forestry and agricultural studies. Thus, the patchy Anthropocene allows Lowenhaupt Tsing to grasp specific entanglements between humans and their more-than-human environments in the Anthropocene.

Field Guide to the Patchy Anthropocene rewires the patchy Anthropocene specifically toward environmental justice and decolonizing ecologies. In this context, attention to patches proves critical for apprehending unjust socio-ecological arrangements in which specific marginalized and oppressed groups are asked or coerced to bear the burden of local ecological devastation. However, Lowenhaupt Tsing and her collaborators argue that the full understanding of those arrangements becomes virtually impossible on a micro-scale. Particular European colonial projects created “systems effects that ricochet across the globe, altering planetary life.”⁹ Thus, decolonizing ecologies that emerged in the wake of those effects requires attunement to “multi-sited, multi-scalar and more-than-human complexity”¹⁰ of the Anthropocene. In other words, patches merely serve as starting points for tracing wider, unexpected, and often contingent encounters between different, sometimes distant ecologies, as well as human and more-than-human world-making projects at different scales. No wonder the authors of *Field Guide to the Patchy Anthropocene* point to Amitav Ghosh’s *The Nutmeg’s Curse* as an example of such a patchy analysis.¹¹ Ghosh begins with a particular ecology of a Banda Island in present-day Indonesia. In 1621, the Dutch massacred its population to grab hold of the island’s precious nutmeg trees and brought in enclave labor for the production of nutmeg. However, Ghosh does not universalize the Banda story but rather connects it to that of the 1637 massacre of the North American Pequot people at Mystic, Connecticut, to draw

conclusions about wider eco-social processes. Only then does he unravel a colonial pattern of terraforming, or transforming land and its human and more-than-human inhabitants according to imperial rules. This analytical syntax allows him to develop “a new form of attention to the particular in the planetary—and the planetary in the particular.”¹² He describes a colonial pattern without losing its differential effect in specific patches. Nonetheless, as Lowenhaupt Tsing and her collaborators remind us, those patterns and effects are never fixed. Moreover, they depend on the particular patch that scholars begin with and the methodological tools that they use. Colonial patterns and effects that emerge when researchers choose patches as tiny as a spot on a leaf look different than when somebody scrutinizes ones as vast as an ocean. Furthermore, this altogether changes when their analysis includes ecological corridors, namely “lines along which organisms or nonliving things move—as a particularly linear form of the patch.”¹³ For Lowenhaupt Tsing and her collaborators, this very open-endedness of patches allows for decolonizing ecologies in the Anthropocene. However, whereas the authors of *Field Guide to the Patchy Anthropocene* always rely on the metaphorical meaning of patches, I will turn to more literal patches—patches of color—to show that Black ecologies are patchy ecologies.

Color(s) of Black Ecologies

Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, the American ecocritic and editor of the collective volume *Prismatic Ecology*, aptly demonstrates that color may prove crucial to thinking about ecologies. In his introduction, he succinctly argues that “[g]reen dominates our thinking about ecology like no other, as if the color were the only organic hue, a blazon for nature itself.”¹⁴ Cohen specifically refers to the green imagery that dominates pop cultural and conservationist representations of nature, usually depicted as a vigorous emerald forest. The imagery has become instrumental

in promoting concepts of sustainability, nature abundance, and resilience across Western popular imaginaries. Subsequently, however, as Cohen succinctly observes, green ecology has also been responsible for maintaining the binary opposition between nature and culture, used to sanction the human mastery of the seemingly inert planet. Moreover, as he suggests, “a preponderance of green prevents the eye from noticing that the aerial is as much a part of an ecology as the arboreal.”¹⁵ In other words, green ecology oversimplifies the complexity of ecological thought by focusing on a limited set of entities, such as woodlands, serene waterscapes or charismatic megafauna. In turn, this reduces caring for ecologies to merely leaving nature to its own devices, which nullifies relations between humans and more-than-humans that may bring about ecological restoration. In this context, the eponymous prismatic ecology aims to look at different colors of the rainbow and beyond to draw attention to such environments that are not idyllic and pristine but emerge from destructive human activities. Nevertheless, as Levi R. Bryant’s contribution to the volume about Black ecology proves,¹⁶ it matters what kind of black we see our ecologies in.

Bryant’s theorization significantly differs from the above Black ecologies predominantly in that it embraces the volume’s rainbow approach. He begins with the non-reflective properties of the black color that absorbs light of all frequencies while not reflecting or emitting light perceivable for humans. The non-reflectiveness becomes a symbol of all human and non-human existence that remains virtually invisible or undetectable yet crucial for organizing relationships within ecologies. For instance, Bryant enumerates not only toxicants such as chemicals released by aerosol cans that permeate land, infrastructure, and bodies, altering them in myriad ways, but also Black human bodies that “draw attention to oppressed human populations and how their oppression is bound up with both social and natural ecological relations.”¹⁷ However, in Bryant’s theorization, Black

ecology does not merely serve to account for the experience of despair and suffering of those marginalized bodies caused by ecological destruction. The space of the invisible and the unseen becomes a site of potentiality; a portent of decentering the Human as the mythical steward of the Earth. In the dark ecological shadows, existence remains outside His control. Thus, its unregulated interactions may give hope for more sustainable visions of the future. Although Bryant aptly foregrounds productive ambivalences of the non-reflective black for thinking about ecologies, when discussing the oppressed bodies, he uncritically refers to the color of their skin. Furthermore, due to the whole volume's focus on colors, he unintentionally reinforces the racializing colonial discourse that naturalizes Blackness as the dominant feature of the subjugated body.¹⁸ To avoid such a risk, in this article, I will not focus on black as the color of the subjugated, but on a specific "colonial" black used by those subjugating them.

Specifically, I turn to the Burgundian black, the highest-quality black to be worn and sold among European aristocracy and merchants from the late medieval to early modern period. Notably, the name of the color has nothing to do with the well-known deep red of the Burgundian wine. It rather points to a less-known Burgundian dynasty that ruled over the Low Countries in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries and only recently has been recognized as foundational to modern Europe.¹⁹ The Burgundians not only played a key part in ending the Hundred Years' War; they also proved instrumental in the European expansion of the Habsburg Empire. Although already in the Middle Ages Europeans considered black as the precious, deep, and rich color of the court, it became a manifestation of political power under the reign of the Burgundian Duke Philip the Good (1396–1467).

Known for his attachment to ceremony and protocol, Philip ruled that in official situations and stately portraits members of his court should exclusively wear black garments. However, he did not aim to convey a message of moderate piety or mourning. He rather wished to make a strong visual impression of political grandeur and dexterity on other rulers who soon began to adopt such chromatic politics. Nonetheless, on close inspection, the Burgundian black is far from monochromatic.



Fig. 1. Rogier van der Weyden *Portrait of Philip 'the Good' of Burgundy (1396-1467)*, Collection Musée d'art moderne (Saint-Étienne), Public domain.

Suffice it to look at the paintings of the Dutch Masters of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries who used the color profusely, especially in their portraits. They often depicted affluent Dutch merchants who saw themselves as direct descendants of the Burgundians and manifested it with the color of their clothing. For instance, as one moves along Anthony van Dyck's *Portrait of Peeter Stevens (1627)*, it turns out that the wealthy silk merchant's sumptuous Burgundian black garment opalizes in blue and red. The iridescence results from the use of two pigments that became crucial for dyeing black from the sixteenth century onward: indigo and cochineal. Those pigments reached the Low Countries through different colonial ecological arrangements which exploited both the Black enslaved bodies from West Africa, the subjugated bodies of Indigenous populations of present-day Mexico, and their intimate relations with those environments. Thus, the Burgundian black serves as a perfect starting point for treating Black ecologies as patchy ecologies. It literally functions as a crucible where different

subjugated human and non-human bodies and their stories meet.

Still, unlike environmental historians following the Burgundian black and its ingredients, I will not rely solely on historical accounts of Dutch colonialism. I will rather scrutinize contemporary transdisciplinary performative projects that mobilize the colorants of colonial provenance that people used to obtain the Burgundian black in the past. Drawing on an extensive archival research, these projects, situated at the intersection of artisanal dyeing art, textile art, and DIY practices, foreground the complicated entanglements—as they are currently understood and reconstructed—between dyeing, ecological destruction, and colonial exploitation of Black and Indigenous bodies, enslaved and free ones. Moreover, they prove that understanding Black ecologies as patchy ecologies does not mean establishing facts and causal relations but centers on embodied practices that constantly re-configure the past to posit new, more sustainable futures. In the first part of the article, I will show what this re-configuring might look like by analyzing the *Burgundian Black Collaboratory* (2019) project by the Dutch textile artist and designer Claudy Jongstra. In the project, she reworks historical dying recipes as an alternative to contemporary ecologically unsustainable synthetic dyes. In the second part of the article, I will examine the ongoing project *Electric Dub Station* (2020 –) by the Panamanian-Dutch artist Antonio Jose Guzman and Serbian textile designer Iva Jankovic, which mobilizes indigo and foregrounds deep interconnections between the Burgundian black and Black suffering under the Atlantic slave trade. Finally, I will trace the colonial history of cochineal by looking at the *System for a Stain* (2016) installation by the American-Chinese artist Candice Lin. The installation demonstrates that the Burgundian black intertwines with the story of Indigenous peoples of Mexico who gained a relative independence from the Spanish colonial regime due to their

unique traditional cochineal cultivation techniques. While each project focuses on a different material and its colonial stories, when analyzed together, they highlight that the Burgundian black is a perfect example of Black ecologies as patchy ecologies.

Black: From Re-Working to Re-Membering

In 2019, the Dutch textile artist Claudy Jongstra organized the *Burgundian Black Collaboratory*, a series of workshops at her farm in the Friesland region of the Netherlands. The title clearly alludes to the transdisciplinary aspect of the project in which artists, historians, cultural scholars, and designers worked together to obtain the famous color. However, even before the workshop started, the team realized that *the* Burgundian black as a single color has never existed. In an extensive research in Italian and Flemish archives conducted by historians Natalia Ortega Saez and Vincent Cattersel, numerous dyeing recipes for the Burgundian black have been identified, each producing a slightly different shade of black.²⁰ Notably, even the most common two-stage recipe prescribed by the dyers' guilds in the Burgundian period did not guarantee the intended color. First, a textile is given a blue undertone obtained by vat dyeing with woad (*Isatis tinctoria*) or indigo (*Indigofera tinctoria*). Next, the blue-dyed textile is top dyed with a red mordant dye, typically madder (*Rubia tinctorum*) and—from the sixteenth century—cochineal (*Dactylopius coccus*). During the workshops, it turned out that each stage heavily depended on environmental conditions. As Jongstra explained in a conversation with the design scholar Ron Wakkary, "it makes a difference if she uses water from a well, rain, or the sea, and even the flow of the gas for heating the indigo bath can create slight variances and differences of shades of black."²¹ Considering such uncertainties and contingencies involved in the process of dyeing the Burgundian black, what did Jongstra and her collaborators

actually do in her studio?

In their article “How Site Matters to Reworking with Makers,” art historians Jenny Boulboulé and Sven Dupré, who also collaborated with Jongstra, argue that the workshop focused not on *obtaining* the Burgundian black but on *re-working* early modern recipes.²² An experimental, collaborative, and transdisciplinary methodology, re-working aims to “gain insight into what artisans did with texts in the past, and how historic recipe texts can be actualized today in collaborative re-research (practices of reinvention) with artists.”²³ In contrast to other “re-” methods recently adopted in art historical research, such as re-enactment in performance studies or re-construction in the study of historical instruments, re-working emphasizes the material and physical aspects of the researched practice. This seems especially relevant in the context of historical recipes which never served as precise instructions but rather *aide-memoirs* where relevant information was implied or considered practical knowledge, for example the exact amount of ingredients or duration of specific actions. The Burgundian black recipes would usually end with the following expression: “Do this until it is black enough,” with no textual records saying what “black enough” meant. As Boulboulé and Dupré point out, re-working the Burgundian black allowed the team “to grasp *the past colour worlds* faded into oblivion with the rise of synthetic colour industries.”²⁴ In this context, color worlds encompass not only the coloring properties of materials used but also dyers’ technical skills, pigments’ chemical properties, and environmental conditions in which dyeing happened. Each of these elements plays an active role in achieving a shade of black. However, Boulboulé and Dupré’s conclusion clearly demonstrates that re-working still involves gaining access to the past, understood as a single temporal unit, as if separated from the present and the future. In turn, such an approach occludes far-reaching implications of Jongstra’s project, which shows that past color

worlds and their devastation have ongoing repercussions in the present, for instance in the local extinction of plants used for dyeing. Moreover, it puts forward an alternative vision of the future where those plants can thrive. Thus, it offers a perfect example of re-remembering Black ecologies.

In her article "Troubling Time/s and Ecologies of Nothingness," Karen Barad coined the term "re-remembering" to show that the modern conception of time as a linear progression from the past to the future—understood as independent temporal units—fails to account for the current environmental catastrophes. In fact, the conception of time intricately links to colonial practices that aim to erase traces of ecological and social violence in the past and avoid taking the ethical-political responsibility for them. In contrast, re-remembering embraces embodied practices that are "not about going back to what was, but rather about the material reconfiguring of spacetime-mattering in ways that attempt to do justice to account for the devastation."²⁵ The use of the hyphen in "re-remembering" stresses that the re-configuring focuses not only on gathering the constituent parts of past human and more-than-human ecologies but also on gauging "new possible histories by which time-beings might find ways to endure."²⁶ This re-configuring of ecologies had started even before the *Burgundian Black Collaboratory* workshops commenced.

Before 2019, in the Netherlands there was literally no woad, the crucial ingredient in the two-stage dyeing recipe. The plant had been last seen in the country over a hundred years ago. From the 1870s, when German chemists synthesized an artificial blue dye, the natural dyestuff became less and less popular and the Dutch farmers ceased to cultivate the plant. Therefore, working with De Beersche Hoeve, a cooperative of biodynamic farmers, Jongstra re-introduced woad to the country. However, to this end, she had to convince eight local farmers in Friesland to dedicate a portion of their land to the plant and revive the three-

field system, replaced by the modern industrial farming. Wood flourished in the depleted soils of the fallow field, left for animals to graze after harvesting. From this perspective, the *Burgundian Black Collaboratory* did not only intend to bring back past color worlds and account for their devastation due to the advent of modernity. It also aimed to modify the present agroecological arrangements toward a more sustainable biodynamic alternative.

However, Jongstra's project extended beyond re-membering more-than-humans in obtaining the Burgundian black to re-membering the color's position in human's everyday lives. Suffice it to look at the *Back to Black*, the exhibition organized as the workshops' outcome. Contrary to what its title suggests, Jongstra's exhibition explored both the past and the future of the Burgundian black. Hosted by Museum Hof van Busleyden in Mechelen, the exhibition gathered the audio-visual documentation of the project, historical artifacts connected to the color, and contemporary clothes. The latter included black felt cloaks designed by Dutch fashion designers Viktor&Rolf who used historical dyeing techniques workshopped by Jongstra and her collaborators. Thus, the minimalist haute couture projects re-member the opulence and luxury of the early modern Burgundian garments, rewiring them toward a more sustainable fashion that uses plant-based organic dyestuffs instead of their synthetic, often toxic counterparts.

Whereas Jongstra's project re-members color worlds of the Burgundian black, it only hints at their embroilment in the exploitation of Black enclaved bodies and its afterlives. Its focus lies in late medieval and early modern recipes, when the Atlantic slave trade still remained in its infancy. However, as Boulboulé and Dupré point out, "the global history of fashionable and luxurious black dress abundant in Netherlandish early modern portraiture finds perhaps its beginnings in the dark splendors of

Burgundian rulers.”²⁷ In other words, the black dyeing techniques developed at the Burgundian court, especially the two-stage technique, provided a pattern for the intertwined exploitation of ecologies and humans. Key figures in the dyestuff trade often engaged in transatlantic slave trade as well, and the ships that carried colorants, alongside other colonial commodities, were the same ships that transported Black enslaved people from West Africa. Nevertheless, to re-member their bodies, we need to shift the perspective from woad to indigo. The latter outcompeted the former already in the sixteenth century, providing a more versatile and steadfast blue chromatic background for the Burgundian black.

Blue: Re-Membering Black Bodies

Electric Dub Station enables such a shift in perspective. The Panamanian–Dutch multimedia artist Antonio Jose Guzman has developed this long-term performative project in collaboration with the Serbian textile designer Iva Jankovic since 2020. Drawing on an extensive archival research, the project uses indigo as a material vessel to specifically explore the historical interconnections between Dutch colonialism, transatlantic slave trade, and the exploitation of Indigenous peoples of the Americas. Still, Guzman and Jankovic do not focus solely on the fact that true indigo grew in the Dutch colonial Suriname in the early seventeenth century. They rather prove that Yee I-Lann, another textile artist from Malaysia who also works with the pigment, is right when she argues that indigo constitutes a “shared global language.”²⁸ She most likely refers to the fact that indigo, first domesticated in India, thrived all across the tropical and subtropical regions of the Southern



hemisphere: in Central America, West Africa, and Southeast Asia. Long before European colonization, in each of those regions, various techniques of processing indigo leaves and dyeing fabrics developed together with local religious and cultural practices. Yet, as Guzman and Jankovic's project illuminates, the diversity of techniques and traditions actually alleviated the emergence of the colonial indigo economy.

In 1520s, when first indigo plantations emerged in Central America, the Spanish and Portuguese soon realized that cultivating indigo and obtaining dye from it demanded hard work, a perfect understanding of indigo's ecology, and practical knowledge. Indigo dyeing required fermenting the plant matter in an acidic solution first, and then adding oxygen by beating the vats to release the blue colorant. Even the slightest mistakes at either stage of the process could lead to spoiling the dye. Thus, the colonizers exploited Indigenous peoples whose dyeing know-how formed their Mayan and Aztec heritage. However, when infectious diseases and colonial violence gradually decimated native populations, the colonizers discovered that Black enslaved people imported as chattel from West Africa also knew how to cultivate indigo, serving as a perfect replacement for the Indigenous peoples. The British, who established indigo plantations in South Carolina and Bengal, soon adopted this arrangement, becoming the largest player in the indigo trade with indigo's profit greater than that gained from sugar and cotton.²⁹ Nevertheless, the interconnections between indigo and transatlantic slave trade involved more than just the hardships of Black enslaved people working on plantations. In her article "Blue Humanities and the Color of Colonialism," cultural scholar Susanne Ferwerda notes that indigo "is also called the 'hidden half' of the Atlantic slave trade, as people were traded for lengths of indigo-dyed cloth."³⁰ Indeed, one length of cloth equaled one human body. Guzman and Jankovic aim to remember those intricate relations between indigo, Indigenous

peoples, and Black enslaved people by developing a “migratory aesthetics” in their project.

Guzman and Jankovic borrow the term “migratory aesthetics” from the Dutch cultural theorist Mieke Bal. Coined in the early 2000s, it aimed to challenge concepts developed by critical cultural studies, such as cultural identity or regional specificity. In the last two decades of the twentieth century, regressive political forces took over these concepts and used them against their proponents. In this context, migratory aesthetics centers neither on a narrowly defined experience of art nor on actual migrants or migration of people. It rather concerns aesthetics as a “condition of sentient engagement [which] foreground[s] the fact that migrants (as subjects) and migration (as an act to perform as well as a state to be or live in) are part of any society today, and that their presence is an incontestable source of cultural transformation.”³¹ Whereas Bal created this condition mainly through an experimental film, Guzman and Jankovic embed their migratory aesthetics in the very process of working on *Electric Dub Station*. The centerpiece of each installation within the series constitutes an architectural form, usually of the gallery’s height, made of hand-dyed indigo blue canvas. Indigo master Sufiyan Ismail Khatri dyed the canvas in Ajrakhpur, which channels the Indian origins of indigo dye. Khatri comes tenth in the line of craft makers who use Ajrakh, the traditional block print dyeing technique. The technique comprises a sixteen-step process whereby the cloth is first printed with a hand-carved wooden block coated with lime and Acacia gum and then repeatedly dyed in indigo and sun-dried while additional prints are added.

While the Ajrakh dyeing creates a fabric patterned with traditional Indian motifs, Guzman and Jankovic combine them with traditional Aztec and Yoruban symbols, thus figuratively fusing the cultures that historically cultivated indigo. What seems most important in the context of re-membering Black ecologies as patchy ecologies, *Electric Dub Station* does not merely trace past connections between peoples and landscapes. Instead, it situates them in Guzman's geo-neurobiography. Thus, the project emphasizes the ongoing presence of those connections in the bodies of the subjugated's descendants.

In the already cited article, Barad introduces "geo-neurobiography" as a conceptual tool for questioning the dominant way of thinking about memory as a human's subjective capacity to retain information from the past.³² As she contends, human bodies "do not merely inhabit, but rather are of the landtimescape."³³ Barad directly refers to the bodies of *hibakusha*, the survivors of the American attack on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. At the moment of the bombing, the radioactive isotopes penetrated their bodies; some of them lingered in their tissue, causing mutations that led to cancer and neurodegenerative diseases. Whereas Barad focuses predominantly on the bodies suffering from the slow violence of radioactivity, Guzman shows that colonial violence toward black bodies is in his DNA. *Electric Dub Station* results from Guzman's earlier artistic exploration of his own mixed origins. In 2010, Guzman took part in the Genographic Project, a study led by the National Geographic Society's scientific team to reveal patterns of human migration by collecting and analyzing DNA samples. Guzman's DNA was traced back to Senegambians, Amerindians, and Sephardic Judaism. Thus, his body literally re-memembers the different populations exploited as part of the indigo industry.



Fig. 2. An example of ajrakh. Author, Ahub1988, Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 3.0 Unported. No modifications.

Fragments of Guzman's DNA appear not only as block-printed DNA bands on the indigo dyed cloths but also in his recitations during performances held in the installation space. These recitations involve abstract strings of letters A, T, C, and G that correspond to Guzman's nucleic acid sequence. A closer look at those performances reveals how Guzman's neuro-geobiography plays a role in re-membering Black enslaved bodies.

Compared to the block print patterns, the live performances draw predominantly on the cultural practices of Black West African enslaved peoples exploited by the colonial indigo trade. The performances usually start with a ceremonial procession led by Guzman. Wearing kimono-like garments made from the patterned indigo cloth, Guzman and invited performers walk into the gallery, often mimicking gestures inspired by Yoruban ritual dances and singing songs that the enslaved sang while tending to indigo on plantations. In the gallery, Guzman recites his DNA sequence, rhythmically screams the names of slaves' families and owners at the Hanover indigo plantation in Surinam, and calls to the Orisha spirits—important figures in the Yoruba religion—to bless the future. However, these performances do not merely re-enact traditional rituals. They are accompanied by loud contemporary electronic dub music, to which the project's title clearly alludes. Guzman chose this genre not only because it formed an important part of the 1990s Dutch rave scene in which Guzman participated. It also plays a significant role in the Afrofuturist movement to which Guzman and Jankovic overtly refer in their work. However, contrary to popular (mis)conceptions of Afrofuturism, *Electric Dub Station* does not focus on gauging futuristic visions of Black liberation through technological means. Instead, it follows the formulation of cultural critic Kodwo Eshun who argues that Afrofuturism can be defined as "a program for recovering the histories of counter-futures created in a century hostile to Afrodiasporic projection and as a space within which the critical manufacturing tools

capable of intervention within the current dispensation may be undertaken."³⁴

In this context, dub music proves crucial as it directly descends from the hard beat drum music that enslaved people performed on indigo plantations. However, the music not only served ritual functions and offered consolation, but as Eshun puts it, functioned as "a Black secret technology"³⁵ used for specific political, often insurgent purposes. The drums allowed the enslaved to communicate with each other outside their masters' control. From this perspective, Guzman and Jankovic's use of dub music through live performance re-configures the stories of Black suffering toward more hopeful, speculative futures. Moreover, as Guzman bodily engages with the music, these futures become a vital part of his neuro-geo-biography. Thus, once a fungible equivalent of a Black body, indigo transforms into a portent of Black liberation, remaining significant today, especially in light of the rise of racist and xenophobic movements in the Netherlands and across the Western world.

Thus, Guzman and Jankovic's project re-members Black enslaved bodies exploited in the production of indigo—crucial for obtaining the Burgundian black—and reconfigures them toward Afrofuturist futures in which the dye plays an important role. Yet, it pays relatively little attention to other bodies involved in Black ecologies as patchy ecologies, most notably the Indigenous peoples of Central America, who were responsible for the key colorant used at the second stage of dyeing black: cochineal. Re-remembering this ingredient of the Burgundian black demonstrates that Black ecologies as patchy ecologies encompass stories of not only subjection but also a relative independence amidst the anguish of European colonialisms.

Red: Re-Membering Other Bodies and Other Stories

Whereas *Electric Dub Station* primarily mobilizes human bodies entangled with indigo, especially in its live performances, Candice Lin's installation *System for a Stain*, first exhibited in 2016 at the Gasworks gallery in London, departs from materials and their agency.



Thus, it offers a glimpse into the colonial history of cochineal and its Mesoamerican cultivation, definitely less known than that of indigo. When visitors enter the gallery, they instantly notice a DIY system of vessels, vats, and tubes crafted from hacked household utensils. This setup makes a red coloring liquid made from cochineal, a pigment extracted from ground bodies and eggs of the scale insect *Dactylopius coccus*, which inhabits nopal cacti of the genus *Opuntia*. Native to northern regions of present-day Mexico, the dyestuff was imported to Europe and gradually replaced a red pigment that Burgundian dyers extracted from the root of madder, an herbaceous plant of the same family as coffee. The Burgundians favored cochineal not only for its carminic acid, which produces a far more vibrant carmine red than ruberthyrin found in madder root, but also because its use allowed them to manifest their close alliance with the Spanish Empire. After colonizing present-day Mexico, Spain established a monopoly on the red colorant. Although Lin's installation does not specifically reference the story of cochineal in colonial Netherlands, it re-memembers the entangled colonial and material histories in which the colorant has been embroiled. This becomes evident as visitors follow the eponymous system for obtaining the

red liquid.

The system begins with a translucent glass jar that contains sweet tea, slowly brewing and fermenting. On the one hand, the fermented tea serves as a mordant, or a substance that binds well with natural fibers and enhances dyestuffs' coloring abilities. As evidenced by Jongstra's project, Burgundian dyers also used it for dyeing black. On the other hand, tea and sugar constitute colonial commodities extracted by violent means. Lin reminds visitors about this colonial legacy using the ceramic funnel through which the tea is poured into the first glass jar. The funnel has a shape of Robert Fortune's head. In the nineteenth century, this Scottish botanist stole tea seedlings from China and clandestinely transported them to India, founding the tea plantation industry. Once the tea ferments, it is filtered and transferred to a copper heater that converts it into steam. The steam is then condensed and passed through a vessel with ground cochineal, infusing it with the red pigment. Next, the fluid cascades through three delicate ceramic vases with representations of cochineal, a botanical illustration of the nopal cactus, and a microscopic image of cochineal, which indexes modern ways of knowing the dyestuff. The liquid collects in a large basin where it macerates and grows increasingly red over time. Finally, another tubing system transports the red substance to an adjoining gallery where it spills over a white marble-like laminate floor, creating a patchy red stain that darkens with time.

Most critics interpret *System for a Stain* as a (re)presentation of "the flow of bodies and materials in commercial trade—a flow that is historically connected to violence and imperialism."³⁶ In this context, the stain usually represents the blood spilled by the subjugated bodies under colonialism. However, such interpretations gloss over the specificity of bodies and fraught interconnections that Lin's installation actually relies on. This specificity becomes more apparent in the second gallery,

offering a more nuanced interpretation of Lin's work. Notably, visitors are invited to watch the red stain while listening to a recording of an older woman, the daughter of a plantation owner. The woman talks about how the installation reminds her of her Latin American caretakers who looked after her as a child. Moreover, as Lin emphasizes in her opening statement, the installation primarily aims to explore "what happens when materials so burdened with history and meaning are situated in—and produce—new systems of relations."³⁷ Thus, one can understand *System for a Stain* as yet another instance of re-membering.

Unlike indigo, which perfectly lent itself to the colonial system of plantation and exploitation, cochineal proved far more unruly. As historian Amy Butler Greenfield points out in her *A Perfect Red*, due to its fragile biology, "cochineal was ill suited to the Spanish system of enterprise—a system that promoted the use of forced or low-wage labor on large-scale, capital-intensive projects."³⁸

Initially, in the hope of high profits, the Spanish conquistadores attempted to grow cochineal on large plantations, like cocoa. Not surprisingly so, given that until the 1730s, Europeans believed cochineal to be the fruit of the nopal cactus. The lack of knowledge about its biology and ecology directly led to the failure of large-area cochineal plantations. As Butler Greenfield notes, "an unexpected storm or frost could ruin them, and fungal diseases and cochineal pests seemed to spread like wildfire in



Fig. 3. "Indian Collecting Cochineal with a Deer Tail" from *Memoria sobre la naturaleza, cultivo, y beneficio de la grana* (. . .) (1777), Author: José Antonio de Alzate y Ramírez (1737 – 1799). Colored pigment on vellum. Public domain.

their large tracts of nopals.”³⁹ However, cochineal’s fragility also worked to the Spanish colonizers’ advantage. Transporting live cochineal to other colonies was virtually impossible. Even when carried in glass terraria, cochineal-infested nopal branches would wither during the long journey before reaching its destination. This prevented numerous attempts by the English and the French to steal cochineal from the Spanish. Even in the 1770s, when the French natural-historian-turned-spy Nicolas-Joseph Thiéry de Menonville eventually managed to secretly import enough nopals to create a small patch in his royal garden near the governor-general quarters in Port-au-Prince, cochineal did not thrive.⁴⁰ Heavy Haitian rains washed the cochineal off the nopals and caused the cacti to decay, while local ant species voraciously devoured the Mexican imports. Moreover, to Thiéry’s despair, the island was already home to a species of wild cochineal, which—although of little commercial value—soon overran the painstakingly cultivated nopals. This story clearly illustrates that, on the one hand, cochineal’s fragile ecology contributed to the Spanish maintaining their global monopoly on the dye. On the other hand, to keep red dye production intact, the colonizers had to significantly modify their colonial governance system.

Following the failure of cochineal plantations, the Spanish had no choice but to leave the cultivation of the dyestuff in the hands of the Indigenous peoples of Mexico. Since time immemorial, these communities had grown nopals in small plots of land using agricultural methods passed from generation to generation. Only they had the know-how and patience to tend to the fragile cactus and its insect parasites. In return, they were granted a relative independence from the colonizers. Suffice it to mention the region of Oaxaca, considered by Native Mexicans the homeland of cochineal. From the mid-sixteenth century Oaxacans enjoyed a virtual monopoly on cochineal production. They could sell the dyestuff on their own account to other

Indigenous peoples or to merchants' agents who offered them lucrative credits. As Greenfield evidences, the considerable profits from cochineal production not only enabled the Oaxacans—in contrast to other Indigenous populations—to make a living while staying close to their kin, but also helped them withstand the pressures of colonization that had already obliterated entire cultures by the sixteenth century.⁴¹ This, in turn, allowed them to preserve their cultural and linguistic diversity. However, contrary to the dominant narrative in Black ecologies, this story is not about the Oaxacan people's resilience but about their ability to adapt to changing circumstances and form unlikely alliances with colonizers. No wonder that when Mexico gained independence and expelled the Spanish traders, the local cochineal industry slowly declined, throwing the region into abject poverty.

From the perspective of the natural-cultural history of cochineal, as recounted by Butler Greenfield, *System for a Stain* does not merely represent the bodies suffering under colonial conquest, slavery, torture, and theft. It not only captures the fragile ecology of cochineal through the fraught tubing system but also encapsulates the paradoxical resistance through adaptation that cochineal afforded. The installation's olfactory qualities, virtually missing from its critical accounts, evidence this resistance. The red fluid gives off an intense, pungent, acidic smell of fermenting plant matter that immediately hits visitors upon entrance. A similar smell might have repelled the conquistadores from dabbling into the cochineal dyeing as they first visited Oaxacan dyers. As cultural theorist Hsuan L. Hsu argues in *The Smell of Risk*, such smells—familiar to Indigenous populations—intricately linked to European colonialism, as they were perceived as dangerous "incursions on the spaces of white respectability."⁴² In other words, smells considered foul by the colonizers served as tools

for defining Indigenous bodies and their environments as impure and unhealthy. In this context, Lin's installation re-members these colonial smellscapes, showing that the smell can also be interpreted as the Oaxacans' means of resistance that kept the colonizers off their traditional dyeing practices and vouchsafed their relative independence. Yet, as visitors move through the installation and their noses adapt to the smell, *System for a Stain* opens an olfactory space where different white and non-white bodies can coexist. Thus, the project rewires the Oaxacan adaptative strategies toward a mode of being together, which, unlike the neoliberal logic of globalization, does not aim to unify specific bodily ways of experiencing the world. Instead, it embraces difference as the foundation of a shared future.

Conclusion: Patching as a Method

The performative projects analyzed in this article demonstrate that Black ecologies extend beyond the geographical or historical study of the intertwined exploitation of environments and Black bodies living in the wake of the transatlantic slave trade. Understood as embodied practices of re-membling, these projects unravel often contingent encounters between various subjugated bodies—Black and Indigenous—their local ecologies, and their histories across the Global South. They also gesture toward forms of subjection to colonialism outside enslavement, which often remain occluded by the prominence of Black studies within contemporary critical environmental theories. However, noticing those entangled forms of subjection requires a situated and embodied practice of knowing, which I tentatively call *patching*. Although methodological reflection goes beyond the scope of my article, I conclude with some points of departure for further investigation, drawing on the semantics of the verb *patch*. On the one hand, the verb signifies putting a piece of material on something, whether for adornment or to cover a gap. However, in this context, *patching* aims not only to bridge gaps in

the existing histories of colonial exploitation of human and more-than-human bodies but also to layer those stories with new, often seemingly unrelated contexts and stories. This layering seeks to prevent any critical environmental accounts from universalizing the experience of one type of colonial oppression. On the other hand, in computer science, *to patch* means to connect a device to a wider digital system. Thus, layering particular ecologies with new contexts and stories may help understand both wider patterns of colonial violence toward humans and more-than-humans and the agentic capacities of the latter in forging modes of resistance. This, in turn, necessitates a constant process of re-writing master narratives that reinforce human dominance over the Earth. Yet, as proved in my analysis, to perform its decolonizing function, such re-writing must always begin in concrete patches, whether metaphorical or literal. In my case, tracing patches of the Burgundian black prevented reiterating the racist rhetoric of the skin color as another means of colonial oppression. Perhaps even more importantly, the material and practical complexity of achieving the iridescent color provided compelling access points to explore intricate, ambivalent, and often unexpected entanglements of colonial violence toward humans and more-than-humans. Following these open-ended entanglements in their forking and opalizing diversity might offer a promising way toward environmentally and socially just futures.

The article was written within the framework of the research project *After Climate Crisis. Non-Scalable Survival Strategies in Speculative Fabulations of the Last Two Decades*, nr UMO-2021/43/B/HS2/01580, financed by National Science Centre.

- 1 J. T Roane and Justin Hosbey, "Mapping Black Ecologies," *Current Research in Digital History* 2 (2019), <https://doi.org/10.31835/crdh.2019.05>.
- 2 Nathan Hare, "Black Ecology," *The Black Scholar* 1, no. 6 (1970): 2–8.
- 3 Hare, "Black Ecology," 8.
- 4 Alex A. Moulton and Inge Salo, "Black Geographies and Black Ecologies as Insurgent Ecocriticism," *Environment and Society: Advances in Research* 13, no 1. (2022): 156–74, <https://doi.org/10.3167/ares.2022.130110>.
- 5 See Tiffany L. King, *The Black Shoals: Offshore Formations of Black and Native Studies* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019).
- 6 Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, Jennifer Deger, Alder Keleman Saxena, and Feifei Zhou, *Field Guide to the Patchy Anthropocene: The New Nature* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2024).
- 7 Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, "Earth Stalked by Man," *The Cambridge Journal of Anthropology* 34, no. 1 (2016): 2–16.
- 8 Lowenhaupt Tsing, "Earth Stalked by Man," 4.
- 9 Lowenhaupt Tsing, Deger, Keleman Saxena, Zhou, *Field Guide*, 30.
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- 13 Lowenhaupt Tsing, Deger, Keleman Saxena, and Zhou, *Field Guide*, 35.
- 14 Jefferey Jerome Cohen, "Introduction: Ecology's Rainbow," in *Prismatic Ecology: Ecotheory Beyond the Green*, ed. Jefferey Jerome Cohen (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015), xix.
- 15 Cohen, "Introduction."
- 16 Levi R. Bryant, "Black," in *Prismatic Ecology: Ecotheory Beyond the Green*, ed. Jefferey Jerome Cohen (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015), 290–310.
- 17 Bryant, "Black," 294.

- 18 This also forms part of a much larger discussion of Timothy Morton's concept of "dark ecology" (2016), mentioned both by Bryant and Cohen as an important source of inspiration. Morton deploys the concept as a mode of attunement to the unsettling multiscalar reality of the Anthropocene beyond the fantasy of the Romantic view of Nature, but it has recently faced criticism from decolonial positions. The use of the metaphor of darkness has been criticized for reinforcing the Western fear of the "Other," which has value only insofar as it leads to the formation of White modern subjectivity. Moreover, according to critics, the concept masks the political dimensions of ecological destruction tied to the processes of Western colonialism. Most recently, Jorge León Caseror and Julia Urabayen have taken up these arguments, claiming that the logic of radically anti-humanist absolute exteriority, inherent to dark ecology, entails an exclusive and even a proto-fascist worldview. See Jorge León Caseror and Julia Urabayen, "No One Came from Outside: A Critique of the Abject-Lovecraftian Foundations of Dark Ecology," *Ilha do Desterro* 76, no. 2 (2023): 181–200. Mindful of this debate, I do not delve into it as Bryant's concept of Black ecology and his metaphorical use of blackness seems more pertinent to my argument.
- 19 Bart Van Loo, *The Burgundians: A Vanished Empire*, transl. by Nancy Forest-Flier (London: Apollo Books, 2020).
- 20 Natalia Ortega Saez and Vincent Cattersel, "Three Types of Black Dyeing," in *Burgundian Black: Reworking Early Modern Colour Technologies*, eds. Jenny Boulboulé and Sven Dupré (Santa Barbara: EMC Imprint, 2022), <https://doi.org/10.55239/bb001>.
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- 22 Jenny Boulboulé and Sven Dupré, "How Site Matters to Reworking with Makers," in *Burgundian Black: Reworking Early Modern Colour Technologies*, eds. Jenny Boulboulé and Sven Dupré (Santa Barbara: EMC Imprint, 2022), <https://doi.org/10.55239/bb001>.
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- 28 Raquel Villar-Pérez, "Indigo Dye: A Shared Language in the Global South," *América Latina*, October 5, 2022, accessed September 20, 2024.
- 29 See Andrea Feeser, *Red, White, and Black Make Blue: Indigo in the Fabric of Colonial South Carolina Life* (Athens, GA and London: The University of Georgia Press, 2013).
- 30 Susanne Ferwerda, "Blue Humanities and the Color of Colonialism," *Environmental Humanities* 16, no. 1 (2024): 12.
- 31 Mieke Bal, "Lost in Space, Lost in the Library," in *Essays in Migratory Aesthetics: Cultural Practices Between Migration and Art-Making*, eds. Sam Durrant and Catherine M. Lord (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2007), 23.
- 32 Barad, "Troubling Time/s," 83.
- 33 Barad, "Troubling Time/s," 84.
- 34 Kodwo Eshun, "Further Considerations on Afrofuturism," *CR: The New Centennial Review* 3, no. 2 (2003): 301.
- 35 Eshun, "Further Considerations," 295.
- 36 Federico Florian, "Candice Lin," *Art in America*, January 27, 2017, accessed September 20, 2024.
- 37 "Candice Lin: A Body Reduced to Brilliant Colour," *Gasworks*, accessed September 20, 2024.
- 38 Amy Butler Greenfield, *A Perfect Red: Empire, Espionage, and the Quest for the Color of Desire* (New York and London: Harper Perennial, 2005), 91.
- 39 Butler Greenfield, *A Perfect Red*.
- 40 See the story recounted in Butler Greenfield, *A Perfect Red*, 165–182.
- 41 Butler Greenfield, *A Perfect Red*.
- 42 Hsuan L. Hsu, *The Smell of Risk: Environmental Disparities and Olfactory Aesthetics* (New York: New York University Press, 2020), 32.

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