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Introduction to the thematic issue: black ecologies.

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From Blackness to Black Ecologies

> **Czerń (blackness)** black color, black clothing, *coll.* peasantry, mob; insurgent people
> *Polish Dictionary* by S. B. Linde (1807)

It is not a coincidence that in his recently published *Radical Futurisms* (2023), T.J. Demos, the American cultural critic writing on contemporary art in the face of globalization, migration, and ecology, returns to Walter Benjamin's well-known essay "On the Concept of History."[1] Demos reads the essay against contemporary exclusionary and divisive identity politics, increasingly dangerous at a time of deep crises which require preventative measures based on solidarity across historical and cultural differences. As he points out, to efficiently counter the variety of identity politics we are currently facing, we need always to think and write in the plural about historical forms of oppression and the contemporary remains of oppressive regimes and practices. We cannot forget that, for several centuries, those regimes and practices denied access to the nominally universal category of human beings not only to non-white people, but also to other subaltern communities, cultures, ways of living, and/or knowing. Thus, paying attention to other forms of exclusion and strategies of denying subjectivity germane to modern humanism does not necessarily have to be a reprehensible "color blind" practice. It is exactly such a non-exclusionary and internally diverse category of people, subject to variegated, often tightly entangled forms of oppression, which Benjamin proposes in "On the Concept of History." Drawing specifically on Benjamin's eighth thesis, Demos contends:

> Today's traditions of the oppressed can similarly only be rendered in the plural, as theories of intersectionality have it, designating a matrix of oppressions co-constituted by

> capitalism, racism, heteropatriarchy, and colonialism. […] Neither readymade category nor endless victimology, its traditions are performatively reconstructed within each iteration of futurist imagination that calls forth specific histories to create the multiracial, anti-capitals movement necessary for emancipation.[2]

In other words, neither local futures nor local pasts are fully predetermined; they are constantly suspended in the potentiality of performative (re)constructions, influencing one another in different varieties of academic and artistic discourses that map complex relations between those pasts and futures.

The intersectional approach fostered by Demos seems to be especially pertinent to contemporary (eco)critical discourses, growingly dominated by ecologies understood through the prism of skin color and race, which are currently co-constituting mainstream critical discourses. As editors of this issue of *View* on black ecologies, we are perfectly aware that the term we propose here may be unambiguously associated – especially by those acquainted with the anglophone environmental humanities – with the decades-long tradition of critical research on systemic violence, exclusion, marginalization, and the oppression of Black bodies, closely entangled with the exploitation of natural resources, the destruction of ecosystems, and pollution.[3] Realizing that one might easily accuse us of the aforementioned color blindness, we nevertheless respond to Demos's call to further diversify critical reflection on the traditions of oppressive regimes and their remains. We aim to do so by paying attention specifically to local forms and traditions of Western modernity in Central and Eastern Europe. These have also generated a non-essentialist understanding of the blackness of oppressed bodies, rooted in different cultures, languages, ways of living, and/or knowing, as well as the ecological entanglements and exclusions those black bodies co-constituted as they formed relations with more-than-human biological, chemical, and geological

entities.

Importantly for our issue, in her article "Perspektywy peryferyjnej historii i teorii kultury" [Perspectives of a Peripheral History and Theory of Culture], the Polish cultural scholar Dorota Sajewska addresses a similar problematic while analyzing the film *Glimpse* (2017) by Polish visual artist Artur Żmijewski.[4] Looking at the history of Poland in the context of colonial regimes, she rightly focuses on what is often referred to as "Polish borderland colonialism." This was inherent to the 1569–1648 territorial expansion of the Polish, predominantly Catholic gentry into present-day Ukraine, and its exploitative politics toward local Orthodox peasants. Although, unlike in the West, the colonial mission was carried out by the feudal gentry state, the situation of the Ruthenian peasants, enslaved through serfdom, was not far from that of the Black enslaved people in the colonies.[5] It is not surprising, then, that as early as the 16th century, the indigenous inhabitants of Ukraine, especially those fiercely revolting against the Polish masters, were referred to as *czerń* [blackness]. This pejorative term drew on earlier inflections of the word, used to describe "a mob" or "common people." Thus, our approach to local forms of colonialism and related black ecologies in Central and Eastern Europe, often sidelined in mainstream research and histories, is sanctioned not only by contemporary intersectionality theories, but also by decolonial histories of the region and historical dictionaries of the Polish language. Nevertheless, following Sajewska, it should be noted that it was not only Demos and Benjamin, both belonging to a "white" culture, who fostered a non-essentialist approach to histories and remainders of oppressive regimes; members of marginalized racial minorities also gestured toward multiple traditions of oppression.

In her text, Sajewska specifically mentions the essay "The Negro and the Warsaw Ghetto" (1952) by the African American writer and social activist W. E. B. Du Bois, which problematizes

Poland as a semi-peripheral space in the context of race and racism.[6] Written under the influence of Du Bois's short stay in Warsaw in 1949, the essay argues that racism "cut[s] across lines of color and physique and belief and status and was a matter of cultural patterns, perverted teaching and human hate and prejudice, which reached all sorts of people and caused endless evil to all men."[7] Half a century later, the Cameroonian philosopher, political theorist, and historian Achille Mbembe wrote about blackness in a similar vein.[8] He contended that racism is more than a question of skin color. Blackness is rather a specific type of human condition (*la condition nègre*); a legacy of various forms of colonialism and slavery marked by abject poverty, cultural marginalization, and radical social inequalities. It seems to us that paying attention to blackness in relation to (eco)humanist discourses is especially pertinent today also because we tend to think about ecology in a different color palette. The most important color in this palette is of course green, with its conspicuous "naturalness" of leaves or grass. Contemporary ecocriticism, however, has already put forward alternatives such as grey ecology or even rainbow ecology.

Anna-Katharina Wöbse and Patrick Kupper, the editors of *Greening Europe: Environmental Protection in the Long Twentieth Century* (2022), argue succinctly that at least since the 1950s, conservation strategies and practices have focused predominantly on green ecology.[9] A case in point is the European Green Belt Initiative, which aims to connect conservation areas from the Arctic to the Balkan Peninsula as a more efficient way of protecting their biodiversity. However, in the mid-1990s, the French urban planner and philosopher Paul Virilio demonstrated that the association between green and the ecologies that ensure human survival is not only limiting but outright anachronistic. In his *Open Sky* he argued that, in the face of a rapidly growing amount of global industrial waste, we should also care about "grey ecology that would focus on the

postindustrial degradation of the depth of field of the terrestrial landscape."[10] Virilio's choice of color was motivated by the entanglements of nature and technology, particularly the developments of transportation technologies, typical for human civilization at the turn of the millennium. Grey ecology derives from the perceptual experience of high velocity, which "steals" colors from passing landscapes. Moreover, digital technologies, Virilio argued, deprive humans of their sense of physical proximity, thwart face-to-face communication, and impede the awareness of grounding, thus transforming "Mother Earth into a phantom organ of humanity."[11] Unlike green ecology, Virilio's grey ecology was less about utopian visions of a happy future than a sober analysis of our present situation and holding to account past crimes against "Mother Earth" – the consequences of which still reverberate in the present.

In the 2010s, cognizant of the need to escape the domination of the color green, the authors of *Prismatic Ecology*, edited by Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, went one step further.[12] They aimed to see ecologies in different colors, and reflect on how thinking about white and red, let alone ultraviolet ecologies, changes the very definition and notion of ecology. In this context, the chromatic spectrum becomes a materialization of multiple dynamically changing situated relations between different ecological actors. Thus, instead of the lush green illusion of pristine Nature, prismatic ecology puts the spotlight on "multihued contaminations, impurities, hybridity, monstrosity, contagion, interruption, hesitation, enmeshment, refraction, unexpected relations, and wonder."[13] Unsurprisingly, then, the color black became one of the figurations of these phenomena, often invisible to the human perceptual apparatus, yet organizing environmental relationships in important ways. In his contribution to *Prismatic Ecology*, Levi R. Bryant reminds us that black absorbs light of all frequencies but does not emit any light waves perceptible to humans.[14] According to him, this space

of invisibility becomes not only a sign of environmental destruction, but also constitutes a space of potentiality, where more-than-human futures might emerge outside Human control, which gives hope for the survival of life on Earth.

However, our approach is far from the dark ecology proposed by Timothy Morton,[15] which became an important point of reference for Bryant and other contributors to *Prismatic Ecology.* Morton's dark ecology is a space of relations between humans and more-than-humans, suffused with melancholy and negative affects. What provides hope for the future is the space of aesthetics, where humor and imagination can be mobilized to make us think and feel beyond the depressive scenarios of the incoming catastrophe. Nevertheless, rooted in Object-Oriented Ontology, Morton's theory is still based on the assumption that dark ecology rests outside human knowing. In contrast, the articles, essays, and artistic interventions gathered in this issue of *View* clearly demonstrate that black ecologies are with us here and now, embroiled in the legacy of European colonialisms and their local forms also present on our continent. The authors look closely at various types of what Kathryn Yusoff terms "broken earths":[16] not so much exploited, ruined, or polluted landscapes, but rather devastated worlds inhabited by human and more-than-human communities. However, we do not focus on landscapes as understood in traditional ecology or environmental history; we are interested in landscapes experienced by a particular body that not only actualizes, modifies, and deforms the landscape's past, but also dis-members and constantly re-assembles it according to its own rules, thus delineating a horizon of possible yet uncertain futures.

Unlike Morton, the works gathered here do not see hope for the future in any specific aesthetic strategies. Their hope lies in practices of re-membering. We borrow the term "re-membering" from the American theoretical physicist and feminist philosopher Karen Barad. In her article "Troubling Time/s and Ecologies of

Nothingness," she introduced the term as a pointer to embodied practices that do not aim to go back to what was, but rather create new material (re)configurations of time, space, and matter.[17] The (re)configurations not only foreground the effects of past forms of violence, but more importantly do justice for the victims. Violence is understood here both in terms of systemic destruction and the pollution of ecosystems, and the processes of the marginalization of underprivileged social groups that were often coerced to bear the detrimental costs of modernity. Barad consciously used a hyphen to stress that re-membering is not about reconstructing *the* past, but about producing "new possible histories by which time-beings might find ways to endure."[18] In other words, re-membering unsettles the modern conception of linear time flowing from the past through the present toward the future, understood as single temporal units. This conception has often served to erase traces of past violence, so that its perpetrators could not be held accountable. In this context, re-membering enables us to describe more precisely the complex socio-ecological aspects of the deepening ecological crisis and work out new – perhaps more equitable – tactics of adaptation and mitigation.

The black ecologies issue of *View* opens with the **Viewpoint** section, in which we present the photo-essay "From Black Coal to Black Earth" by Ukrainian artists Alexandra Clod and Karolina Uskakovych. The article is a result of their joint residency organized by the IZOLYATSIA cultural platform in Newcastle (UK) as part of the artistic project (Re)Grounding. Clod and Uskakovych's artistic-research practices perfectly exemplify our approach to re-membering the color black and black ecologies. The project proceeds from the artists' family stories, of miners from the Kharkiv region in Eastern Ukraine and peasants from the Vinnitsa region in Central Ukraine. For different reasons, the two communities maintained a close relation with the land through home gardening practices. On the one

hand, tending to a backyard or allotment garden, miners could find relief from backbreaking work underground; on the other hand, working the fertile black earth helped peasants survive the Holodomor famine of 1932–1933. Clod and Uskakovych read those land cultivation practices alongside contemporary community gardening initiatives, aptly demonstrating that home gardening offers viable local tactics for survival in post-industrial reality, where another future turns out to be possible.

The **Perspectives** section gathers two more works that focus on selected elements of Poland's post-industrial landscapes, to demonstrate that black ecologies can be captured by diverse and multidimensional artistic-research practices. In her essay "From Black Silesia to Green Coal," Marta Tomczok also mobilizes personal family stories and ethnographic work, focusing on the specific materiality of coal. Her aim is to reclaim its close bodily and affective relation with humans. This relation is an important alternative to both the modern extractivist mindset, and contemporary decarbonization projects that often neglect the importance of coal for local post-mining and post-steelworks communities, for instance in Silesia. And reclaiming this relationship gives hope for a more just ecological and social future after coal. The essay "A Lullaby for Dolores" by Ewa Wziętek switches position from the blackness of coal to the agency of the machines used for its extraction. The eponymous Dolores is a gigantic bucket-wheel excavator that worked at the "Konin" open-cast lignite mine in the Wielkopolska [Greater Poland] region. Analyzing contemporary practices of including Dolores in regional industrial heritage, Wziętek reclaims the agency of the machine as an embodiment of ambivalences typical of black ecologies. The remains of reprehensible extractivist practices, particularly in Poland, become a crucial symbol of dignity, especially for industrial workers who, after 1989, were often made redundant.

Both **Viewpoint** and **Perspectives** set the scene for themes

running through the **Close-Up** section. This comprises articles that analyze multidimensional, dynamic, and performative aspects of black ecologies from an academic perspective, putting them in different contexts. The section opens with Polish translations of English texts pertinent to our approach to black ecologies. The fragment of Kathryn Yusoff's book *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None* problematizes the racist discourses and practices of geology which transformed Black bodies into fungible matter.[19] Yusoff, however, does not aim to give the oppressed a voice as liberal political subjects; she convincingly argues that close, often intimate relations between Black bodies and inhuman matter may bring about practices of resistance and insurgence different than the modes of political agency dominant in "white" Western modernity. While Yusoff focuses on the intersections between the Anthropocene and the objectification of Black bodies, Anna Tsing, in the second translated text, points out that, perhaps counterintuitively, the new epoch is a mosaic and uneven phenomenon comprising myriad autonomous but overlapping patches. In this complex reality the new nature emerges, formed by the unplanned effects of human actions. Thus, Tsing invites us to look carefully at different intersectional relations between humans and more-than-humans, noticing their differential effects, both positive and negative.

The subsequent two articles address black ecologies by analyzing literary (re)presentations of post-industrial landscapes important for Polish culture: Nowa Huta, the now easternmost district of Kraków, and Upper Silesia, Poland's largest mining region. The former features in Mateusz Borowski's "Re-Membering Bodies in Black Ecologies." Scrutinizing selected short stories from Elżbieta Łapczyńska's collection *Bestiariusz nowohucki* [*Nowa Huta Bestiary*] (2020), Borowski convincingly argues that these stories attempt to re-member the history of the once industrial district as a more-than-human history, routing around traditional historical accounts based on causal

relations. In Łapczyńska's work, bodies are never full-fledged subjects; they are constantly formed and deformed by the more-than-human forces unleashed in an environment intensively exploited by humans. Borowski points out that this approach to the body not only offers a different interpretation of the district's (possible) pasts, but also contributes to grasping the local effects of lead pollution which change Nowa Huta on the cellular level. This in turn proves that, in black ecologies, the boundary between the body and its environment, of great importance to the Moderns, virtually disappears. In her article "Of an Ongoing Past: Stories of and from Black City," Małgorzata Sugiera addresses this disappearing boundary from a slightly different angle. Analyzing the *Czarne Miasto* [*Black City*] trilogy (2022–2023) by Marta Knopik in the context of the accelerating deindustrialization of Upper Silesia, she argues that the author is not interested in the traditional linear narrative in which the region's industrial past leads to a post-industrial future. Nor is she keen on mainstream histories which depict miners and steelworkers as archetypal proletarians, so as to deliberate on how industrial heritage can be preserved. In Sugiera's reading, Knopik's trilogy depicts Silesia through the lens of workers' wives and children as a non-linear knot of multiple temporalities. Hope for a (post-apocalyptic) future lies in their marginalized epistemic practices, which carry experiences of other-than-extractive relations with the Earth and more-than-human entities.

The last two articles in this section reflect on black ecologies by looking at examples of other-than-literary cultural practices. In his "Blue and Red Make Black: Re-Membering Black Ecologies as Patchy Ecologies," Mateusz Chaberski scrutinizes performative projects at the intersection of dyeing, textile art, and DIY practices that use indigo and cochineal, dyestuffs of clear colonial provenance, to obtain Burgundian black. From the late medieval to the early modern period, Burgundian black was regarded by the European upper classes as the highest-quality

black to wear. Situating selected performative projects in the context of Anna Tsing's findings, Chaberski demonstrates that black ecologies are always patchy ecologies. They are mosaics of different, often unexpected and often contingent encounters between seemingly distant ecological phenomena and marginalized bodies living in the wake of European colonialisms. In her article "Real Darkness, Grim Visions of the Future, and 'Ethical Obscurity': Spaces, Effects, and Visualizations of Deep-Sea Extractivism," Maria Wodzińska scrutinizes research and activist practices that criticize deep-sea mining and the extraction of natural resources from beneath the seabed. Those critical practices unveil the blackness of the ocean depths in which lurks an "ethical obscurity": a sphere of unclear rules, inefficient regulations, and murky interests which, moreover, serve to colonize the last place on Earth outside of human mastery. Examples selected by the author not only foreground specific political and economic subjects as responsible for the exploitation, but also project new (eco)activist tactics which may stop the extractivist practices.

The article, "The colours of a destroyed land. Visualizations of the heaps of the Upper Silesian Coal Basin in films of the communist period as a cognitive archive of environmental memory" by Paweł Tomczok, published in the **Panorama** section, is a complement of sorts to the previous analyses of black ecologies. The author scrutinizes films by Kazimierz Kutz and Stanisław Jędryka, offering a slightly different approach to post-industrial landscapes, especially spoil heaps and slag heaps. Focusing on landscapes devastated by the pollution from zinc steelworks, Tomczok succinctly observes that they may become a cognitive archive of living in and experiencing these industrial areas, be it everyday or artistic.

This issue of *View* ends with the **Snapshots** section, which gathers three reviews of books published in 2024 in Poland and abroad that directly or indirectly relate to our main theme.

Aleksandra Ross writes about the recent collective volume *Field Guide to the Patchy Anthropocene*, by Anna Tsing and her collaborators Jennifer Deger, Alder Keleman Saxena, and Feifei Zhou. Tymon Adamczewski looks closely at Anna Barcz's Polish translation of the aforementioned *Dark Ecology: For a Logic of Future Coexistence*, by Timothy Morton. Finally, Michał Pałasz reviews the latest book by Ewa Bińczyk, *Uspołecznianie antropocenu* [*Commoning the Anthropocene*], which shows the necessity of combining reflection on the multipronged ecological crisis with critique of neoliberal ways of thinking about the world, dominant in the contemporary economy, which tend to reinforce local and global social inequalities. In different ways, the reviewed works foreground the necessity to produce the intersectional approaches which T. J. Demos writes about. Approaches that would connect the deepening crises with manifold traditions and experiences of various types of oppression. We hope that the proposed understanding of black ecologies is only the beginning...

1 T. J. Demos, *Radical Futurisms: Ecologies of Collapse, Chronopolitics, and Justice-to-Come* (London: Sternberg Press, 2023).

2 Demos, *Radical Futurisms*, 48–49.

3 For a critical review of the latest propositions and theories within this research, see: Alex A. Moulton and Inge Salo, "Black Geographies and Black Ecologies as Insurgent Ecocriticism," *Environment and Society: Advances in Research* no. 13 (2022): 156–174, doi:10.3167/ares.2022.130110.

4 Dorota Sajewska, "Perspektywy peryferyjnej historii i teorii kultury," *Didaskalia* no. 156 (2020), https://didaskalia.pl/pl/artykul/perspektywy-peryferyjnej-historii-i-teorii-kultury.

5 See: Daniel Beauvois, *Trójkąt ukraiński. Szlachta, carat i lud na Wołyniu, Podolu i Kijowszczyźnie 1793-1914* (Lublin: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Marii Curie-Skłodowskiej, 2005).

6 W. E. B. Du Bois, "The Negro and the Warsaw Ghetto," in: Du Bois, *The Oxford W. E. B. Du Bois Reader*, ed. E. J. Sundquist (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1966).

7 Du Bois, "The Negro," 472.

8 Achille Mbembe, *Critique de la raison nègre* (Paris: La Découverte, 2013).

9 *Greening Europe: Environmental Protection in the Long Twentieth Century*, eds. Anna-Katharina Wöbse and Patrick Kupper (Berlin/Boston: de Gruyter, 2022).

10 Paul Virilio, *Open Sky*, trans. Julie Rose (London: Verso, 1997 [1995]), 41.

11 Virilio, *Open Sky*, 66.

12 *Prismatic Ecology: Ecotheory beyond Green*, ed. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015).

13 Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, "Introduction: Ecology's Rainbow," in: *Prismatic Ecology*, xxiv.

14 Levi R. Bryant, "Black," in: *Prismatic Ecology*, 290–310.

15 Timothy Morton, *Dark Ecology: For a Logic of Future Coexistence* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016).

16 Kathryn Yusoff, *Geologic Life: Inhuman Intimacies and the Geophysics of Race* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2024), 1.

17 Karen Barad, "Troubling Time/s and Ecologies of Nothingness: Re-turning, Re-membering, and Facing the Incalculable," *New Formations* no. 92 (2018): 56–86.

18 Barad, "Troubling Time/s," 63.

19 Kathryn Yusoff, *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017).