



Blue Humanities and the Color of Colonialism

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Abstract The cultural study of water has seen a prismatic shift toward the color blue. This is often articulated as a move away from the terrestrial focus of green ecologies and environmentalism, toward blue aquatic inquiries. What happens when green becomes blue and the blue humanities take shape under the umbrella of the environmental humanities? This article examines the blue humanities to argue that its blues address colonial inheritances and critique colonial desires. Blue has long appealed to the colonial imaginary; it drew European ships across the seas to mine blue pigment from Afghan rocks and raise indigo plantations on stolen land, with stolen labor. The article analyzes the lapis lazuli series by Dutch artist Pieter Paul Pothoven and the performance of the poem “Unity” by Aotearoa New Zealand poet Selina Tusitala Marsh. Pothoven’s work shows how blue analysis accounts for the fact that the color blue has built empires, taken lives, and altered environments. Marsh’s poetry and presence in the heart of the British Empire visualizes blue resistance against imperial power and the persistent defiance of colonization in the Pacific region. The article argues that blue transoceanic European and Pacific colonial connections become disarticulated in the blue humanities and their aquatic encounters.

Keywords blue humanities, colonialism, feminist materialism, visual studies, poetry

In the second half of the eighteenth century, officers of the British Royal Navy began wearing dark blue uniforms. Up to that point naval officers had worn their own clothing. But in order to rebrand the Royal Navy, secure a lasting image of authority, and differentiate between ranks, from 1748 onward navy blue uniforms became standard issue. The British naval uniforms would soon inspire global naval dress. A deep blue was chosen not to signify sky or sea but for a reason “far more logistical, relating back to the British colonization of India and the expansion of the East India Trading Company.”¹ The British choice to dye their naval uniforms indigo was motivated in part by access but also because it is a very colorfast dye, “outclassing other colors in withstanding extensive exposure to sun and salt water.”² One of the commodities the East India

1. Geczy, Karaminas, and Taylor, “Sailor Style,” 145.

2. Geczy, Karaminas, and Taylor, “Sailor Style,” 145.

Trading Company exported was the plant *Indigofera tinctoria*, the main ingredient of the vivid blue indigo dye. Indigo had been used sparingly in Europe throughout history. The ancient Greeks named it the “Indian substance” (Ἰνδικόν φάρμακον), which via Latin (*indicum/indico*) and Portuguese (*endego*) became “indigo” in Dutch before becoming the common denominator for this color across several seventeenth-century European languages.³ In the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, India had been the “world’s earliest major center for indigo growing and processing. . . . The most important variety of indigo in early trading systems, *Indigofera tinctoria*, was domesticated here.”⁴ Because the indigo plant is native to tropical zones in South Asia, the Americas, and Africa, indigo dye had been expensive and rare in Europe until the growth of the British Empire on the Indian subcontinent in the seventeenth century and the colonization of the Americas in the eighteenth century. The deep blue indigo color that we now know as navy blue thus has a distinct colonial material history.

Blue has been desired by the European elite for centuries. The value and scarcity of deep blue shades led to its limited representation as the color of “blue blooded” royalty and otherworldly riches until its rise as the color of Western colonialism. Like the imagined treasures waiting in the minds of Europeans at the other end of the ocean, the color blue appealed to the colonial imaginary and drew ships across the seas to mine blue pigment from Afghan rocks and raise indigo plantations on stolen land, with stolen labor. Looking at the material history of indigo and several other blue colonialisms, this essay examines the implications of recent shifts from green toward blue approaches in the environmental humanities. If we are indeed in a “blue turn,” what are we turning from and turning toward? What is the historical and conceptual baggage that the color blue carries?⁵

“Going green” or “living green” often stands for adopting a zero-waste and sustainable lifestyle, connecting color to aesthetics and, more often than not, to a more digestible type of capitalist consumerism. Green has long been synonymous with nature and ecology and a preferred descriptor for sustainability. In *Prismatic Ecologies*, Jeffrey Jerome Cohen writes that “green dominates our thinking about ecology like no other, as if the color were the only organic hue, a blazon for nature itself.”⁶ Developing a more expansive “prismatic ecology,” Cohen decentralizes green from its environmental throne: “Such a colorful ascription begs the question of exactly what mode of being we are attempting to sustain, and at what environmental cost.”⁷ Like green, blue has been increasingly present in institutional and intergovernmental discourse as an adjective to draw attention to

3. This includes seventeenth century Dutch, Spanish, and Portuguese.

4. Kriger, *Cloth in West African History*, 120.

5. Braverman and Johnson, *Blue Legalities*, 2.

6. J. Cohen, *Prismatic Ecologies*, xix.

7. J. Cohen, *Prismatic Ecologies*, xx.

potential economic development of bodies of water.⁸ These color changes incite me to question what happens when green becomes blue: What exactly is and can blue be? How can we think beyond a simplistic equation of blue with water, oceans, and seas, to investigate what thinking with blue means in the blue humanities?⁹ Inspired by Donna Haraway, it matters what colors color colors; how blues blue blues.¹⁰ Reckoning with the coloniality of blue informs its potential for present and future blue endeavors. Untangling colonial blues as well as the anticolonial resistance this color encourages, blue shows itself as a color that always already resists simplistic signification.

The polyvocal theoretical currents that are thought-with in the blue humanities build on the expansive nature of environmental cultural thought and the genealogies of aquatic scholarship. Drawing on Donna Haraway's "situated knowledges" and Maria Puig de la Bellacasa's "thinking-with that resists the individualization of thinking," the blue humanities can be thought of as enacting a "thinking-with-many," moving from fields of thought to seas of circulation.¹¹ The many that inform the blue humanities, and particularly the analysis of aquatic colonial undercurrents, include insights from Epeli Hau'ofa, Paul Gilroy, Kamau Brathwaite, Elizabeth DeLoughrey, Édouard Glissant, Marcus Rediker, Alice te Punga Somerville, Kerry Bystrom, Isabel Hofmeyr, Stefan Helmreich, Hester Blum, Steve Mentz, Margaret Cohen, Peter Steinberg, Kimberley Peters, Cecilia Åsberg, Laura Ingersoll, Stacy Alaimo, Ann Elias, Christina Sharpe, Craig Santos Perez, Laura Winkiel, Astrida Neimanis, and Melody Jue, with-many-more.¹² Their work and the various edited collections and special issues that have evoked the "blue humanities," "critical ocean studies," "hydro-criticism," and "liquid ecologies," address the numerous beginnings of the aquatic humanities before and beyond the articulation of the blue humanities.¹³ Neimanis's assertion that "we are all bodies of

8. Blue economy, as defined by intergovernmental organizations and financial institutions such as the United Nations and the World Bank, refers to a range of economic sectors and related policies—coastal tourism, fishery, shipping, offshore mining—that view the ocean as a resource primarily for human use. "Blue carbon," per the US National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), refers to the human-emitted carbon that is captured "by the world's ocean and coastal ecosystems" (NOAA, "What is Blue Carbon?"), envisioned as a marketplace for carbon offsets and storage solution for increased carbon dioxide emissions.

9. The expression "thinking with blue" is inspired by Cecilia Chen, Janine Macleod, and Astrida Neimanis's influential collection *Thinking with Water* and Melody Jue's *Wild Blue Media: Thinking through Seawater*.

10. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, 12.

11. Haraway, "Situated Knowledges," 581; Puig de la Bellacasa, "Nothing Comes without Its World," 199–200.

12. See Hau'ofa, "Our Sea of Islands"; Gilroy, *Black Atlantic*; Brathwaite, *ConVERSations*; DeLoughrey, *Allegories of the Anthropocene*; DeLoughrey, "Toward a Critical Ocean Studies"; Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*; Rediker, "History from Below the Water Line"; Te Punga Somerville, "Where Oceans Come From"; Bystrom and Hofmeyr, "Oceanic Routes"; Helmreich, *Alien Ocean*; Blum, "Prospect of Oceanic Studies."; Mentz, "Toward a Blue Cultural Studies"; Cohen, "Literary Studies on the Terraqueous Globe"; Steinberg, *Social Construction of the Ocean*; Steinberg, "Of Other Seas"; Steinberg and Peters, "Wet Ontologies, Fluid Spaces"; Åsberg, "Sea Change"; Ingersoll, *Waves of Knowing*; Alaimo, *Exposed*; Elias, *Coral Empire*; Sharpe, *In the Wake*; Perez, "Ocean in Us"; Winkiel, "Hydro-criticism"; Neimanis, *Bodies of Water*; Jue, *Wild Blue Media*.

13. Special issues include Winkiel, "Hydro-criticism"; Blum, "Oceanic Studies"; Yaeger, "Oceanic Studies"; Bystrom and Hofmeyr, "ACLA Forum: Oceanic Routes"; Alaimo, "Science Studies and the Blue Humanities";

water” and Te Punga Somerville’s foregrounding of the long genealogy of Indigenous oceanic kinship add an expansive materiality to Stacy Alaimo’s consideration of humanity’s “aquatic ancestors” and our trans-corporeal “kinship with the seas.”¹⁴ These discussions prove the need for the blue humanities to address the continuation of the watery beyond continental boundaries via a “transoceanic imaginary” and a “hydrocolonial” approach to salty, brackish, and fresh water.¹⁵

Expanding the environmental humanities to the realm of the blue then invokes the question: What exactly does thinking with blue add to these already existent aquatic and oceanic discourses? And what does it mean to do the blue humanities and consider the blue not just as symbol but as material-semiotic actant or figuration?¹⁶ In this essay I develop an analysis of the color blue through its colonial materiality to argue that in the blue humanities blue unmoors and loosens the anchor of Western colonial desire.¹⁷ Like the oceanic “violet-black” depths Alaimo calls upon to “understand the water of the abyssal zone as something rather than nothing,” the blue puts the colonial to sea and surfaces its material significance.¹⁸ I analyze the work of Dutch visual artist Pieter Paul Pothoven and the poetic performance of Aotearoa New Zealand poet Selina Tusitala Marsh to show how the blue always already asserts itself and acts to resurface and subvert transoceanic colonial connections. This essay aims to unpack the coloniality of blues—including indigo, ultramarine, and royal blue—in conversation with the work of two contemporary artists to show how the color blue acts in the world—materially, socially, economically, and culturally—via the dynamic work it does in the blue humanities, “in the wake” of colonial desire.¹⁹

Blue Colonialisms and Ultramarine beyond the Sea

Navy blue is not the only shade of blue with a captivating material history and colonial reverberations. The histories of several blues can be traced back to early capitalist trade and imperial expansions across the seas. For a long time, the most beautiful blue in the world was widely considered to be ultramarine, also named true blue or, according to the fourteenth century Italian painter Gennino Gennini, “the most perfect of all

Campbell and Paye, “World Literature and the Blue Humanities”; and most recently Fackler and Schultermantl, “Kinship as Critical Idiom in Oceanic Studies.” Edited collections of specific interest include Blackmore and Gómez, *Liquid Ecologies in Latin American and Caribbean Art*; Chen, Macleod, and Neimanis, *Thinking with Water*; Cohen and Quigley, *Aesthetics of the Undersea*.

14. Neimanis, *Bodies of Water*, 66; Te Punga Somerville, “Where Oceans Come From”; Alaimo, *Exposed*, 113.

15. DeLoughrey, *Routes and Roots*; Hofmeyr, “Provisional Notes on Hydrocolonialism”; Maas, “Where Tide and River Meet.”

16. Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women*.

17. Alaimo, “Unmoor.”

18. Alaimo, “Violet-Black,” 235.

19. Sharpe, *In the Wake*, 3.

colours.”²⁰ The ultramarine pigment is mostly composed of the blue mineral lazurite, which is the main component of the lapis lazuli mineral stone (a “stone from the sky”: *lapis* is Latin for “stone,” *lazuli* came to Latin via the Arabic لآزورد, which came via the Persian لاجورد, meaning “sky” or “heaven”). It owes its deep blue shade to a mixture of minerals—lazurite, silicates, and iron pyrite—and covers a wide range of shades “from a deep, almost violet blue, through the royal blue of the gem quality to light blue, a turquoise and finally fewer pieces of brilliant green.”²¹ This means that natural ultramarine is never an entirely uniform shade of blue. The most high-quality shades contain a high percentage of lazurite, giving it a bright, rich, and warm blue tone.

To extract natural ultramarine from ground lapis lazuli is incredibly labor intensive. The process involves grinding stones to a fine powder and mixing it with wax, resin, and linseed oil:

This mass, usually wrapped in a cloth, was left to sit for several weeks, after which it was kneaded in rain water or a diluted solution of lye. The blue particles dispersed into the liquid, while the impurities remained in the mass. This process was usually repeated several times, with each successive extraction generating a lower quality pigment. The final extraction—consisting largely of colourless material, and a few small blue particles—was known as ultramarine ash.²²

The high cost of the imported raw material, combined with the laborious process to produce a high-quality pigment, meant that for a long time ultramarine was at least as expensive as gold. The deep blue of ultramarine has therefore long been a symbol of extravagance and luxury. The trade of lapis lazuli dates to at least the Mesopotamian Late Ubaid period, circa 3500 BCE, “probably the first moment that man had sufficient wealth and leisure to begin the quest for luxuries.”²³ Our current knowledge of the history of ultramarine dates to the fifth-century murals in Nisa (Turkmenistan) and extends into the twenty-first century. In March 2001, the sixth-century Bamiyan Buddha statues were declared false idols by the Taliban government in Afghanistan and blown up with dynamite. Once upon a time, the two Buddhas had been covered in precious stones and ultramarine and carmine robes. In his travel report, *Dà Táng Xīyù Jì* 大唐西域記 (*Great Tang Records on the Western Region*), Chinese monk Xuanzang 玄奘 describes his visit to Bamiyan circa 629–645, as he makes a detour on his way to India in order to see the giant sculptures:

To the north-east of the royal city there is a mountain, on the declivity of which is placed a stone figure of Buddha, erect, in height 140 or 150 feet. Its golden hues sparkle on every

20. Cennini, *Craftman's Handbook*, 36.

21. Hermann, “Lapis Lazuli,” 24.

22. van Loon et al., “Out of the Blue.”

23. Hermann, “Lapis Lazuli,” 21.

side, and its precious ornaments dazzle the eyes by their brightness. To the east of this spot there is a standing figure of Sâkya Buddha, made of metallic stone (teou-shih) in height 100 feet. It has been cast in different parts and joined together, and thus placed in a complete form as it stands.²⁴

The ultramarine pigment used for the robes of the smaller Buddha statue likely came from the nearby mines in the Blue Mountain (Koh-e-Laguard). The mines in the Sar-e-Sang valley (the “Place of the Stone”) in the Badakhshan mountains in northeastern Afghanistan were the main supply for European and Persian ultramarine up until 1830.²⁵ Afghan ultramarine was most extensively desired in Europe in the fourteenth to sixteenth centuries, when it was transported from East to West along the famous Silk Route from Afghanistan to Syria and across the Mediterranean Sea into Europe. This journey remains embedded in its name. Ultramarine, in Latin, means “beyond the sea.” It refers to the voyage beyond the Mediterranean Sea that European traders had to take to obtain the pigment, but also signifies its superlative blueness—the most blue, more blue than the sea—so blue that every artist in the fourteenth, fifteenth, and sixteenth centuries aspired to use it.

In *Bluets* (2009), her autobiographical prose-poetic ode to the color blue, Maggie Nelson writes that ultramarine “had to be made holy, by the wicked logic that renders the expensive sacred.”²⁶ In the Middle Ages, Afghan lapis lazuli was so expensive that painters could only use it sparingly, dependent on the wealth of their patrons. To not waste its extravagance on unworthy subjects, only the most highly regarded, most holy subjects in Western Christian art were afforded the deep blue pigment. Ultramarine’s otherworldly cost and provenance could only be justified by restricting its use to honor the otherworldly divinity of the Virgin Mary. The blue robes that Mary wears in Giotto’s *Lamentation* (Scrovegni Chapel, 1306), for instance, are painted in ultramarine blue, a tradition that would continue for centuries and would solidify the narrative connection between blue and otherworldly riches. The ultramarine blue of Giotto’s work and in particular his depiction of the life of Christ and Mary in the Scrovegni Chapel in Padua, Italy, has challenged theorists and asks us to consider: What effect does the perceived extravagance of the color blue have on its signification and identification?

24. Xuanzang quoted in Beal, *Si-yu-ki*, 50. Xuanzang’s travels were moreover used as inspiration for the novel *xi you ji* 西遊記 (*The Journey to the West*), written by Ming dynasty author Wu Cheng’en in 1592.

25. Lapis lazuli has been found and mined across the world, including in Canada, Italy, Pakistan, Myanmar, Siberia, Chile, California, and Colorado. The Afghan mines are the oldest source of ultramarine and the place where the highest-quality lapis lazuli was found. They supplied the Ancient Egyptians, Romans, Greeks and Mesopotamians. The funeral mask of Tutankhamun (1341–1323 BCE) contains Afghan lapis lazuli to line the eyes and eyebrows as well as the cheaper dark blue glass that was produced to imitate lapis lazuli (Nicholson, “Stone . . . That Flows,” 16). Lapis lazuli from the Sar-e-Sang valley was used in Ancient Egyptian art, along with the calcium copper silicate Egyptian blue pigment, “to colour the hair of gods and wigs of kings and the dead” (Griffith, “Gods’ Blue Hair,” 332).

26. Nelson, *Bluets*, 59.

In “Giotto’s Joy” (1980), French feminist philosopher Julia Kristeva writes that the overwhelming colors used in Giotto’s frescoes, and in particular the overwhelming blues, translate “instinctual drives into colored surface.”²⁷ Kristeva’s feminist psychoanalytical analysis draws on color perception theory and infant vision development to argue that blue has a quality beyond identity: “The perception of blue entails not identifying the object; that blue is, precisely, on this side of or beyond the object’s fixed form; that it is the zone where phenomenal identity vanishes.” On the basis of André Broca’s paradox that “to see a blue light, you must not look directly at it” and the idea that infants do not develop “centered vision—the identification of objects, including one’s own image,” or an ‘ideal-I,’ until after the development of color perception, Kristeva argues that blue always escapes identification. Blue, with its short wavelengths, is even “earlier to appear” in the vision of the infant child than any other color.²⁸ Feminist visual art theorist Barbara Bolt explains Kristeva’s description of seeing Giotto’s blue as the “experience of the (Lacanian) Real erupting into and disrupting signification. . . . Colour is destabilizing.”²⁹ Kristeva writes, “All colors, but blue in particular, would have a noncentered or decentering effect, lessening both object identification and phenomenal fixation. They thereby return the subject to the archaic moment of its dialectic, that is, before the fixed, specular ‘I,’ but while in the process of becoming this ‘I’ by breaking away from instinctual, biological (and also maternal) dependence.”³⁰ Kristeva’s analysis of Giotto’s disruptive blue enforces a material-semiotic response that goes beyond symbolic representation. Giotto’s blue is more than a symbol of otherworldly wealth, more than paint on the ceiling; it entangles viewer and pigment, and uncenters human-subjectivity to the more-than-human materiality of the blue and its origins beyond the seas.

When ultramarine and indigo meet, they destabilize the idea that expansive wealth and obtaining new minerals and materials across the seas is a universal sign of linear progress. Kristeva’s viewer “enters into the semidarkness of the Arena Chapel . . . struck by the light that is generated, catching the eye because of the colour blue.”³¹ He walks into the Scrovegni Chapel as a Western subject, a humanist I, overwhelmed with his visions of control over the natural wealth of the world, and loses himself just by looking at the bright color pigment on the walls. If, following Bolt and Kristeva, the color blue indeed disrupts, decenters, and destabilizes, what does this mean for the way it is employed in the blue humanities? The unruly presence of Giotto’s brilliant blues reinforces the West’s economic and political force and legacies of extractive violence but simultaneously exposes its limits. The materiality of blue, as otherworldly-pigment-beyond-the-sea, foregrounds the coloniality of its past, but like in Sharpe’s “wake work,” “the past that is not the past reappears, always, to rupture the present.”³² Narrating the colonial

27. Kristeva, “Giotto’s Joy,” 207.

28. Kristeva, “Giotto’s Joy,” 208.

29. Bolt, “Whose Joy?,” 62.

30. Kristeva, “Giotto’s Joy,” 208.

31. Kristeva, “Giotto’s Joy,” 207.

32. Sharpe, *In the Wake*, 9.

histories of Giotto's blue and ultramarine shows that blue unmoors simplistic signification and acts to disrupt a colonial logic of extraction.

Pathways and Blue Extractivism

In 2009, Dutch visual artist Pieter Paul Pothoven traveled to Afghanistan for seven weeks, in search of lapis lazuli and the famous Sar-e-Sang mines. Funded by the Netherlands Foundation for Visual Arts, Design and Architecture (Fonds BKVB) he visited the mines for two days, which resulted in several series of works over the past twelve years that use lapis lazuli both symbolically and physically.³³ For *Laguard* (2010–15), Pothoven photographed five cut and polished slabs of the lapis lazuli he purchased in Afghanistan, near the Sar-e-Sang mines.³⁴ The photographs show five different types of lapis lazuli, out of the thirteen types the Sar-e-Sang mineworkers differentiate.³⁵ The bright blues of the lazurite mineral are marbled with the white of the calcite and the light-golden pyrite, resulting in images from “beyond the sea” that resemble drone shots of ocean waves crashing into the shore (fig. 1). Pothoven's series draw on the historical fascination with the high-quality lapis lazuli from Afghanistan and show the wide range of blues that can be extracted from the mineral rock. His work is, moreover, indebted to the changing sociocultural and material situation of late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century Afghanistan. The pieces of lapis lazuli Pothoven bought in Afghanistan traveled to the Netherlands with the assistance of the Dutch military forces, “shipped by the Dutch Embassy through Kamp Holland (ISAF) in Tarin Kowt, Uruzgan, to the naval base in Amsterdam . . . where Dutch East India Company (VOC) ships were once built.”³⁶ *Laguard*, as well as Pothoven's subsequent series, would not have existed without the assistance of the Dutch navy, itself part of the 2001 imperialist invasion of Afghanistan by US and allied Western forces. The ways in which Afghanistan has been conceptualized since the nineteenth century are closely connected to imperial geopolitical agendas and the Orientalist paradigm that underlies the “war on terror.”³⁷ Pothoven's work attests to the “asymmetric distribution of labor, power and wealth” and the connection of the arts to the legacies of Western extractivism, but it ultimately treads similar blue colonial pathways and, via his purchase of stones and their subsequent voyage to Amsterdam, reiterates these patterns.³⁸

33. van Velzen, “DIG Interview”; at the time of writing, Pothoven's lapis lazuli series include *Laguard* (2010–15), *Shaft Gallery Drop* (2010), *In Absentia* (2010), *Lapis Lazuli from Serr-i-Sang* (2012–15), and *Consignor Consignee* (2021).

34. Named after the Koh-e-Laguard mine, the Blue Mountain, where the lapis lazuli consisting of the purest lazurite is found. The most valuable lapis lazuli is called “sorghpar,” the name of the lapis lazuli seen in figure 1.

35. Pothoven, “Laguard.”

36. Pothoven, “Consignor Consignee.”

37. For critiques of the Western imperial imaginations of Afghanistan post-2001 military interventions and ways to rethink and represent Afghanistan, see Bose, *Intervention Narratives*; Manchanda, *Imagining Afghanistan*; Osman, *Television and the Afghan Culture Wars*.

38. Pothoven, “Consignor Consignee.”

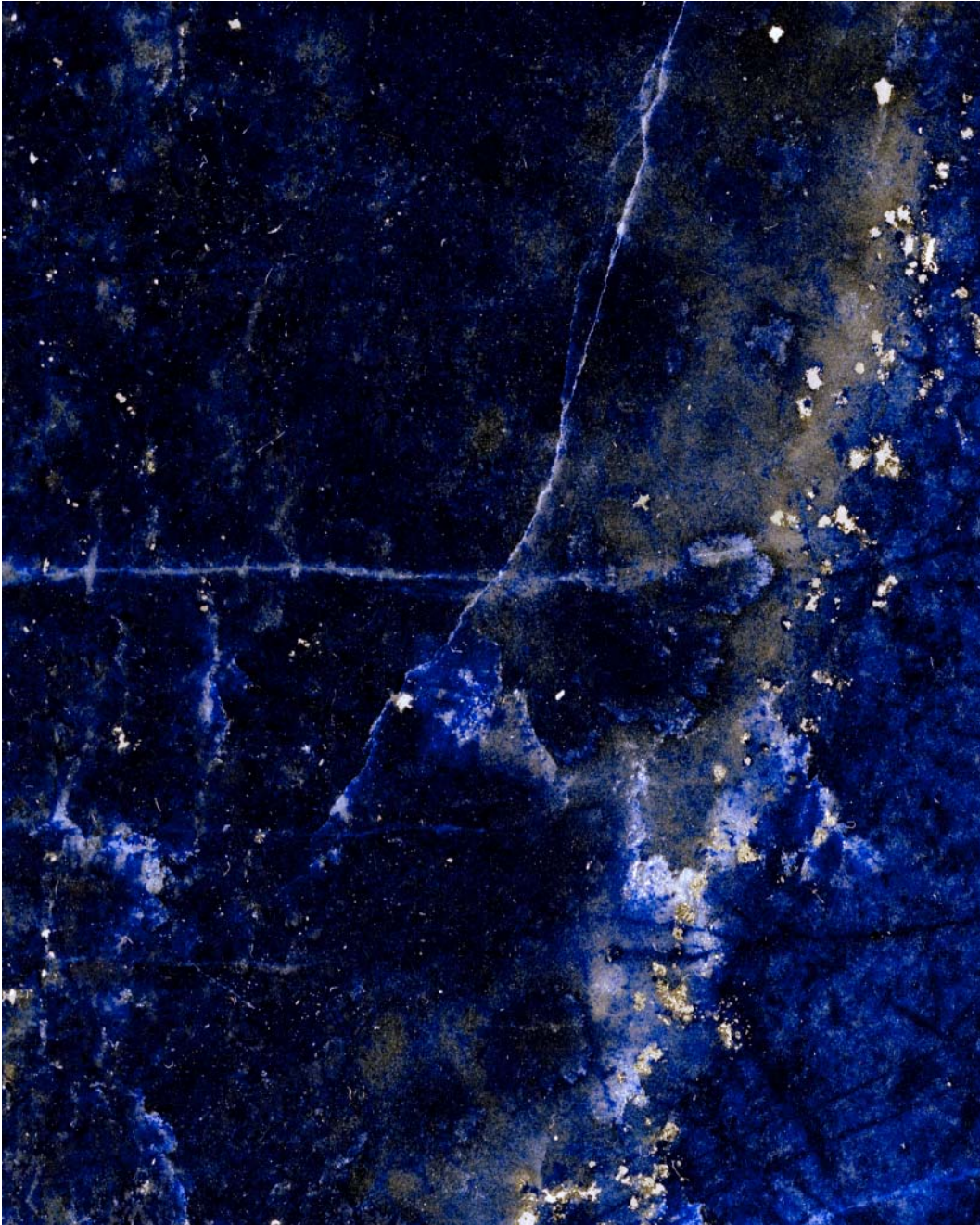


Figure 1. Pieter Paul Pothoven, *Sample 2/1, Sorghpar Adit #1*, from the series *Laguard* (2010). Courtesy of Dürst Britt and Mayhew, The Hague, Netherlands.

The series of photographs titled *In Absentia* (2010) consist of three almost entirely black-and-gray images (fig. 2) of the entrance to the main Ser-e-Sang mine. Surrounding the dark visualization of the entrance to what once held vast amounts of lapis lazuli, some flecks of light stand out and appear to reflect the gold-colored iron pyrite that marbles the lapis lazuli stone. The mines' dark and hollow appearance, Patricia Pisters



Figure 2. Pieter Paul Pothoven, *Main Mine, Adit #2*, from the series *In Absentia* (2010). Courtesy of Dürst Britt and Mayhew, The Hague, Netherlands.

writes, is “a reminder of the condition of the mine workers, who risk their lives in their daily journey up the mountain to go into the belly of the mountain to blast, drill or cut out its blue matter with very simple tools and in unsafe conditions.”³⁹ The absence of blue and depiction of the empty mine is representative of the dark side of the idolization of the color blue that Pothoven’s work draws attention to. The disruptive nature of Giotto’s blue is doubled as blue mountains and mines make way for the post-9/11 “geopolitical fetishism” of the terror hiding in Afghan caves.⁴⁰ *In Absentia* makes visible the capitalist extraction of the lapis lazuli rock and the human cost of ripping the blue out of the mountain, and the literal darkness that has taken over Sar-e-Sang now that much of the lapis lazuli has disappeared. Yet it also visualizes the imagined darkness of the cave in the early twenty-first century. The mountain, the cave, the rock, the pigment, the ship, the navy, and the military are part of the blue colonial threads that are woven of blue material and its remnants across thousands of years.

Pothoven’s work critiques the Western obsession with the most expensive blue in the world and visualizes its increased absence. Yet his work simultaneously affirms the continued appeal of these deep blue shades and retraces the journeys of the lapis lazuli rock in a post-9/11 world. His beautiful blues speak to the imagination and affirm our

39. Pisters, “Deep Blue Geomeditations,” 41.

40. Bose, *Intervention Narratives*, 10.

continued obsession with these famous Afghan pigments. This shows that in our contemporary engagements with the blue, it remains difficult or even impossible to escape its colonial and material complexity. The colonial void of the blue in Pothoven's lapis lazuli series, like Kristeva's absent referent in Giotto's Scrovegni Chapel frescoes, visualizes the disruptive nature of Western blue desires. Ultramarine unsettles and uncenters the dominant Western subject and exposes the blue humanities to the potency of the blue itself. Thinking with blue in the blue humanities via Kristeva and Pothoven shows that blue cannot be equated with simply water, which also always already "varies in viscosities, intensities and densities" and exposes the blue humanities to this complexity.⁴¹ The rocky qualities of lapis lazuli are entangled with the seas, the mountains, and the fabric of military naval dress in a blue figuration that destabilizes Western blue desires, further shown in a material-semiotic analysis of indigo.⁴²

Indigo and Royal Blue Disruption

Like ultramarine, indigo has long been a color of disruption. As the European craving for lapis lazuli grew, so did the pursuit of other sources of blue. Animal-derived blue from, for instance, the punctured gland of the *Murex trunculus* sea snail, was similarly expensive and required tens of thousands of snails for a single kilogram of dye. The other popular blue, indigo, had long been extracted from the native European "woad" (*Isatis tinctoria*). But with the discovery of Indian-grown indigo (*Indigofera tinctoria*)—the plant used to dye British naval uniforms—the British had eyes on a more versatile and color-fast dye. Throughout the medieval period, European monarchies had attempted to block the trade of Indian indigo in order to protect the economic stability of the local woad production. Indigo became colloquially known as the Devil's Dye, in opposition to the godly ultramarine. But once the Portuguese, the Dutch, and then the British established maritime connections between Europe and Asia, indigo was imported in such vast quantities that woad prices inevitably dropped. In the seventeenth century, indigo emerged as the dominant blue of the modern world, and by the eighteenth century, indigo production had become inextricably entwined with the transatlantic slave trade, further expanding colonial blue pathways.⁴³

Motivated by the widening market for indigo, the British invested in the creation of large-scale plantations in the New World in order to expand indigo production and increase the empire's wealth. The extensive use of slave labor on large plantations on occupied lands in, for instance, Jamaica and South Carolina meant that even with the added cost of transporting indigo back to Europe, British merchants could keep the price of indigo so low that European woad could no longer compete. Indigo became the blue that would make the British Empire wealthier than it had ever been. This blue wealth

41. Blackmore and Gómez, *Liquid Ecologies*, 2.

42. Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women*.

43. Sandberg, *Indigo Textiles*; Nash, "South Carolina Indigo"; McKinley, *Indigo*.

came at the cost of many African people's lives, whose bodies were used to grow indigo and many of whom died as they were forced to cross the Atlantic Ocean. Indigo, along with ivory, pepper, and other commodities, is also called the "hidden half" of the Atlantic slave trade, as people were traded for lengths of indigo-dyed cloth.⁴⁴

After the American Revolution in the late eighteenth century, the British lost access to cheap American-grown indigo and moved their production to India, expanding the British Empire eastward by colonizing Bengal and erecting indigo plantations on the lands of local farmers. Recently returned to India from South Africa, Mahātmā Gandhi was called by freedom fighters to lead the first Champaran Satyagraha movement in Bihar in 1917, also known as the Indigo Revolution.⁴⁵ As Vandana Shiva notes, the movement for Indian independence grew from the "movement of peasants against the forced cultivation of indigo" and the "movements of non-cooperation [that] started wherever the British tried to tax the lands of the peasant and the homes of the people."⁴⁶ Along with salt, the indigo plant became a symbol for noncooperative resistance against British colonial rule. Like the disruptive nature of ultramarine, indigo ignited the movement for freedom from British rule and their continued exploitation of the earth, seas, and people through blue colonialisms.

These British blue colonialisms bring me to the writing and poetic performance of Aotearoa New Zealand poet Selina Tusitala Marsh, who in her capacity as Commonwealth poet 2016 shook the continued blue colonialisms and blue desires of the British Monarchy and Commonwealth empire. When Marsh walked onstage to perform the poem "Unity" in London's Westminster Abbey on March 14, 2016, her words and presence reverberated in this imperial space par excellence. She stood in front of the British royal family and a legion of high-placed invitees as well as over a thousand school children. It was Commonwealth Day, and Marsh was that year's Commonwealth poet. "It's called the Va in Samoan philosophy / what you do, affects me / what we do, affects the sea," she said, addressing the audience, including Her Majesty, Queen Elizabeth II, who was sitting at the very front, to Marsh's left.⁴⁷ Of her experience of the event, her performance, and meeting the royals, Marsh later writes:

She has the most recognisable face in contemporary Western history and she's almost within my reach. The longest-reigning British monarch and I share a few things: we are both seated in Westminster Abbey (founded in 960); we share the same birthday (on 21

44. Hogendorn and Gemery, "The 'Hidden Half' of the Anglo-African Trade."

45. Majmudar, *Gandhi's Pilgrimage of Faith*, 138; Shiva, "Satyagraha," 80–82.

46. Shiva, "Satyagraha," 82. Shiva also cites "Mr R. W. Tower, the Magistrate of Faridpur in Bengal," who "said to Commission on the grievances of the indigo tenants, 'Not a chest of indigo reached England without being stained with human blood'" (Shiva and Prasad, quoted in Shiva, "Satyagraha," 82).

47. Marsh, "Unity," lines 11–13. Unity also appears in Marsh's 2017 collection *Tightrope*, with some minor differences to the performed version. Here, I cite her performance and the text as it appeared in the Commonwealth Service booklet.

April 2016, I turn forty-five and will be exactly half her age, a quirky fact I thought to share but then my Samoan discretion got the better of me); and we are both wearing blue in a sea of black and beige, as observed by many an attendee afterwards.⁴⁸

Marsh was wearing a deep Pacific blue dress and silk wrap that pays homage to her Samoan-Tuvaluan-English-Scottish-French heritage but confused some of those present. The blue of Marsh's dress was interpreted by some attendees as a political response to the royal setting and the customary royal blue garment of Her Majesty, Queen Elizabeth II, who that day was wearing a powder-blue dress and matching hat. "My dear, how politic of you to wear the royal blue," someone said to Marsh afterward, who answered: "The blue of majestic *te moana nui a kiwa*, the Pacific Ocean? Why thank you!"⁴⁹ Marsh's appearance and, by extension, the Pacific Commonwealth she represents are inherently personal and political, and therefore disruptive to the royal blue traditions at work in Westminster Abbey.

There is often little observable difference between the darker shades of blue. Navy blue, cobalt blue, royal blue, Pacific blue, Egyptian blue, and Prussian blue, for instance, sit across a similar range of dark blues of varying cooler and warmer tones. The name royal blue is said to have originated with the silks worn by Queen Charlotte—wife of King George III between 1761 and her death in 1818—at the height of the British expansion into the Indian indigo trade. Derived from the royal obsession with the godlike qualities ascribed to the deepest blue shades as well as the increased appeal of indigo dyes, the royal blue we know today is a vibrant deep blue shade that is close if not identical to the highest quality natural ultramarine or the deepest of indigo shades. The color of the finest lapis lazuli can be described as "a pure royal blue without blemish" that was turned into a deep and irresistible blue pigment.⁵⁰ It is the royal setting that generates the royal association to the blue shade Marsh was wearing in Westminster Abbey. The prominent presence of Pacific blue in Westminster Abbey disrupts the dominance of reading all deep blues in royal environments as belonging to European royal empires. Her Pacific blue dress and wrap, representing the deep blue tones of the Pacific Ocean, entangle the colonial and the oceanic.

The poem Marsh wrote for the 2016 Commonwealth Day celebrations, "Unity," follows the official theme and implores all Commonwealth nations to come together and "shar[e] our thoughts over a cup of tea."⁵¹ Her thoughts, however, politely but forcefully critique the hierarchies at stake in Commonwealth realities. The tension between the United Kingdom, the Pacific, and their relative positions within the wider Commonwealth are palpable as Marsh says: "There's a 'U' and an 'I' in unity / costs the earth and

48. Marsh, "Post-colonial Talk Back."

49. Marsh, "Post-colonial Talk Back."

50. Hermann, "Lapis Lazuli," 24.

51. Marsh, "Unity," line 37.

yet its free.”⁵² Invoking her heritage and family history, she takes aim at the idea that “West is best”: “my ancestors were guided by sky and sea trails / and way before Columbus even hoisted his sails!”⁵³ Her words both symbolically and materially connect the Pacific region to the United Kingdom: “Did you know there’s a London in Kiribati?”⁵⁴ Several of Kiribati’s atolls and settlements carry European names: Poland, for example, lies south of London, across the main lagoon. In her Commonwealth poem Marsh not only talks back to the continued colonial presence in the South Pacific, she also redefines the center and moves her audience from London, UK, to London, Kiribati.⁵⁵

The blue connections that are drawn in the performance of “Unity”—the Pacific blue of Marsh’s dress against the powder blue of Queen Elizabeth’s—reinforce the idea that thinking of blue addresses as well as disrupts the extractive colonial legacies that are inextricably tied to the color. In her poem, Marsh foregrounds that Commonwealth relations do not exist because of the power that is held in the United Kingdom, but by virtue of the unity that keeps the queen alive rather than the other way around. Looking directly at Queen Elizabeth, she speaks: “bees thrive in hives keeping their queen / unity keeps them alive, keeps them buzzing / they’re key to our fruit and vege supplies / but parasitic attacks and pesticides / threaten the bee, then you and me / it’s all connected—that’s unity.”⁵⁶

The blue unity that Marsh draws on unsettles the extractivist coloniality that merely serves the continuation of the center of empire. In an interview about her poetry collection *Tightrope* (2007), which features “Unity” as well as two other poems that engage with Marsh’s royal encounters,⁵⁷ she speaks to the transformative power of poetic color: “Unity is what my poetry seeks to create. Unity of the multitudinous stories that constitute our memory, which in turn, form our history, ‘the remembered tightrope,’ to quote Albert Wendt. The morphing colours of that beautiful rainbow line [on the cover of *Tightrope*] evokes the many hues of our lives that refuse to be forgotten.”⁵⁸ The instructions for writing the Commonwealth poem were to stay away from politics,

52. Marsh, “Unity,” lines 23–24.

53. Marsh, “Unity,” lines 29–30.

54. Marsh, “Unity,” line 3.

55. Paloma Fresno-Calleja explains in “Talking Back, Fast, and Beyond” how Marsh redefines the postcolonial notion of “the empire writes back”—an expression from Salman Rushdie that became the title of Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin’s *The Empire Writes Back* (1995)—and “conceives of her poetry as a tool to ‘talk back,’ prioritizing the performative quality of her work in line with the oral traditions that inform it and the cultural encounters and representations that originated in the colonial Pacific and which continue to determine more contemporary representations” (Fresno-Calleja, “Talking Back, Fast, and Beyond,” 370).

56. Marsh, “Unity,” lines 17–22.

57. In *Tightrope*, “Unity” is followed by “Pussy Cat,” which starts with the nursery rhyme “Pussy cat, pussy cat / Where have you been? / I’ve been to London to visit the Queen” (lines 1–3), and “Queens I have met,” featuring Dr Ngahuia, HRH Elizabeth II, Oprah, and Alice Walker. Marsh describes Queen Elizabeth II as having “Boucheron blue irises / set in the cool parchment / of your skin / lines written into Britain’s history / powder-blue hat, white gloves / (changed to black in the / running of the crowd)” (lines 38–44).

58. Green, “In Conversation with Selina Tusitala Marsh.”

but when the personal is political—the realities of Pacific life influenced by centuries of colonial politics—the presence of a Pasifika woman in Westminster Abbey can only ever disrupt colonial blue signification. Her dress, her heritage and her words embody the continued resistance of the Pacific region against the imperial coloniality that connects the ocean to the growing threat of the climate change realities shaping contemporary Pacific life.

Conclusion

Thinking with blue not only addresses the importance of reckoning with coloniality in the blue humanities but also attends to the powers at work that have always already entangled the blue as pigment, as textile, as rock, and as symbolic of water, sea, and ocean. The emergence of the blue humanities as a subfield of the environmental humanities draws on the ways in which the blue has long been an actant in the trans-oceanic movement of power: of riches, trade, violence, and the consequences of imperial extractive politics.

While both Pothoven and Marsh engage with contemporary colonial and extractive blues, they work differently with what blue can do for environmental futures beyond blue colonial desires. Pothoven's account of the afterlives of blue extraction and cost of obsessions with Afghan rocks and caves show that the blue has built empires, taken lives, and altered environments. His work looks back on the long history of blue desires. Marsh's poetry, on the other hand, undoes the marginalization of Pacific blue at the heart of the British Empire. Her performance visualizes continued blue resistance against imperial power and the persistent defiance of colonization in the Pacific region. Standing tall on the Secretarium Steps of Westminster Abbey, she invokes Giotto's blue ceilings and disrupts royal blue signification. In Marsh's blue presence, the Pacific is large and the royals seem small.

The oceanic and the blue are entwined, and as exemplified in Pothoven and Marsh's work pushes beyond a simple equation of the blue in the humanities as the symbolic color of water. The rocky blue lapis lazuli and the vegetational blue of indigo suggest alternative modes of possible blue humanities that address blue colonial inheritances but critique colonial desires. *Thinking with blue* accounts for the entanglement of the watery and oceanic with the colonial materiality of rocks, textiles and unmoored materiality. The blue is rock. The blue is ocean. The blue is river. The blue is mineral. The blue is textile. The blue is colonial. The blue is anticolonial. Blue touches all aspects of life on Earth, and as the global blue connections of this essay show, thinking with blue foregrounds blue resistance.

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