

Title PD	Unlearning Photography: Listening to Cyanobacteria
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How can BioArt¹ facilitate a living alternative photographic methodology to envision our world without a camera, through a non-chemical production process and with a non-human gaze?

This research looks through an investigative lens at the intimately relationship between toxicity and analogue photography, in which almost all analogue processes use non-degradable chemical compounds. A few times a year I would go to the recycling station with my liquid photographic chemical waste. The weight of the jerry cans filled with 'ecological disaster' made me increasingly disgusted with myself. Not only was I a menace to the environment, but also for my own body. My physical reactions to years of sniffing and touching chemicals in the photographic Dark Room gave me nagging headaches with every new contact. The chemicals had slowly found their way through my largest organ, my skin, into my inner self.

Analogue photography is not only through its chemical production processes entangled with toxicity, but also through the socio-political power structures and harmful norms of defining, categorizing and creating the visible. Given the imperial context in the 19th century in which most photographic processes were invented, it should come as no surprise that photography was built upon the assumption that 'whiteness' represented the norm. A striking example is that photographic film emulsions could not register dark tones in the same way as light tones. Geographer and prison abolitionist Ruth Wilson Gilmore puts it very clearly:

KODAK changed their film, not because of people, but because of chocolate. The chocolate makers, supported by race-horse owners and furniture manufacturers, compelled Kodak to change its emulsions, so that dark and light together in a single picture could be seen.²

¹ BioArt is an art practice where artists work/collaborate with living organisms and life processes to create works of art.

² Wilson Gilmore, Ruth. *Black Lens: An Experimental Moving-Image Seminar*, La Colonie, Paris, 29-03-2018.

Author, curator and theorist Ariella Aïsha Azoulay states that “imperialism is not going to disappear without us unlearning our scripted roles as the operators of imperialism”.³ This phrase directly relates to the power of the person holding a camera and pointing their lens at a subject – both living or non-living subjects – and all the power structures connected to this action.

Although it is impossible to completely unlearn my own "scripted role" as a photographer, as that would imply that I can undo the chemical damage already present in my own body, it is possible, as the decolonial thinker Walter D. Mignolo puts it, to delink⁴ myself from my socio-political role as a photographer.

To do this, I found my ideal interlocutor in Cyanobacteria, the first organisms on Earth to perform oxygenic photosynthesis, absorbing carbon dioxide and releasing oxygen. It was through a provoking text of critical theorist and filmmaker Elizabeth Povinelli that I encountered these fascinating micro-organisms. Povinelli writes of humans as the “afterlife of cyanobacteria breath”.⁵ Cyanobacteria are microorganisms to whom we owe our lives. They changed the Earth’s atmosphere 2.3 billion years ago through releasing large quantities of oxygen. As “inventors” of the oxygen-generating photosynthetic process, Cyanobacteria have shaped the evolution of respiration on planet Earth. Little by little, they made the Earth inhabitable for humans. What can we learn from our ancient Cyanobacteria ancestors?

This research takes place in the ‘interstices’ between photography, BioArt and decoloniality. In this research I use ‘listening’ and ‘unlearning’ as methodologies for artistic practice and combine them with fundamental microbiological methods. It is a process that takes place in the day to day: to read what is not written, to hear what is not told. To see what is invisible and to listen to the unspoken.

Facing photography’s toxic histories, I investigate alternative photographic methodologies, to envision the world without a camera, through a non-chemical production process and with a non-human gaze. Therefore, I propose a new approach to photography, a change in attitude to make photography more horizontal and less anthropocentric. A type of photography where I, as a photographer, am no longer in control of the actual image, but rather create the circumstances and conditions in which photographic images may evolve.

Or, to formulate very concretely: It is my wish to find a ‘living micro-organic photographic process’ in deep collaboration with Cyanobacteria and other micro-organisms, a process that continuously converts carbon dioxide and releases oxygen, but also a process in which the result is always in progress. I would like to call it a queer, more-than-human or other-than-human, breathing work of art, in which transformation is the image.

³ Azoulay, Ariella Aïsha. ‘Connecting Museums, Modern Art, Colonialism, and Violence’, [Hyperallergic podcast](#) by Hrag Vartanian, 11-03-2020.

⁴ Mignolo, Walter, Hoffman, Alvina. Interview Walter Mignolo / Part 2: Key Concepts, [E-International Relations](#), 21-01-2017.

⁵ Povinelli, Elizabeth. ‘Fires, Fogs, Winds’, published in conjunction with the exhibition “Let’s Talk about the Weather: Art and Ecology in a Time of Crisis”, Surssock Museum, 2016.