7. The Coloniality of Materiality: Brazilwood, or Unlearning with Anton de Kom in the Mauritshuis

Oscar Ekkelboom

Anton de Kom wrote *We Slaves of Suriname* (1934) when he was banished to the Netherlands for being one of the foremost advocates of Surinamese independence from Dutch colonial rule. Although exiled from his motherland, he nevertheless tells his story from Sranan—the soil to which "the slave ships carried their African prizes, their living merchandise, our parents and grandparents" (De Kom, *We Slaves* 48). Prior to their arrival to Mother Sranan, before the era of slavery, De Kom explains that this land slumbered and "nothing changed in the dense forests of her unknown interior" (45). Indeed, it is only since coloniality that these forests and the enslaved people are subjugated, mutilated, and exploited for the enjoyment of modernity. As De Kom clearly articulates, the pleasures of modern culture are implicated in the suffering of others and the destruction of the Earth:

> You, white reader, may have learned in school that the Mauritshuis in The Hague is paneled with the most precious brazilwood. As you pause to admire this paneling, we ask you to consider that it was our mothers, who with this heavy burden on their head day after day (because Sunday was one institution that the Christian civilizers neglected to introduce in Suriname), trudged over hilly terrains, through pools and swamps, constantly threatened by the whip your ancestors wielded. (De Kom, *Wij slaven* 36; my trans.)

By exposing what I term the coloniality of materiality, De Kom awakens a white museum audience, immersed in the beauty of European aesthetics and craftsmanship, to the brutality of slavery and the contemporary experience of coloniality.

As a material, the brazilwood of the Mauritshuis' paneling appears to be key to De Kom's experience of the museum. These wooden decorations alone offer a case study for a decolonial analysis of the colonial wound the author addresses. However, during a fire in 1704, long before *We Slaves of Suriname* was written, the interior of the Mauritshuis, including the carpentry to which De Kom refers, was wholly destroyed. Yet, this historical fact by no means serves to discredit De Kom. To the contrary, his reflections on the historic and contemporary experiences of coloniality—that is, of slavery and the suffering of the Earth—open up a critical view on the method-

ologies that focus on the materials of culture. Thinking with De Kom, this chapter diverts from the dominant art historical reading of the museum centered on European canons and aesthetics. Instead, by inquiring into the coloniality of materiality, I aim to reconstitute that which the European trajectory of thought hides and erases so that epistemologies that understand the Earth and the museum differently can re-emerge.

Drawing on the notion of decoloniality and the insights it offers into the coloniality of power, being, and gender, as introduced by Aníbal Quijano and further elaborated, among many others, by Walter Mignolo, María Lugones, and Rolando Vázquez, this chapter introduces the coloniality of materiality. This notion brings European epistemology, which views the world through materials, in relation to the colonial matrix of power. Specifically, this chapter explores how Europe's modern civilizational project colonizes the Earth by materializing it both conceptually and through its actual destruction. I will argue that within the colonial matrix of power, these movements work in reciprocity. By bringing the coloniality of materiality into the same scope as the coloniality of power or being, I explore how modern thinking about materials, materiality, and material culture, as surveyed by Tim Ingold in his article "Toward an Ecology of Materials," renders invisible the destruction of the Earth and Earth-beings inherent in the production of materials. This chapter, therefore, first seeks to address the colonial difference that separates modernity's enjoyment of materials from coloniality's suffering. Second, it explores how modernity's conceptualization of materials is itself a negation of the destruction of the Earth.

Delinking from the Coloniality of Materiality

Decolonial thinking and doing, as practiced by the thinkers introduced above, urges us to ask different questions than those presented by postcolonialism or new materialism (Mignolo and Walsh; Vázquez). According to Vázquez, within new materialism, as in other scholarly accounts of materials, "critique becomes reduced to a form of presentism" because it confines itself to the affirmation that "reality is co-extensive with radical immanence" (128). This means that its critical thought is only concerned with that which occurs in material reality. In contrast, decoloniality is engaged with what is lost and erased through exploitation, denigration, or appropriation. Consequently, the forms of criticism that exclusively engage with materials are insufficient from the perspective of decoloniality. As Vázquez suggests, "decoloniality calls for a turn in our disposition towards the real, from enunciation to listening, from extraction to cultivation, from appropriation to reception … from what has been dismembered to re-membering" (119). In other words, decoloniality seeks to reconstitute that which is not immanent or historically present (anymore). It is from this starting point that I provide a conceptual platform from which to consider the

experience of a material that is lost—an impossible experience in the modern rational mind.

Within the colonial matrix of power, the coloniality of materiality concerns the negation and erasure of non-material realities. Underpinning this rejection, I argue, is an understanding of the Earth as a composition of materials. Ingold shows how deeply thinking of materials is rooted in modern epistemology. His own work builds on this tradition, as he considers the Earth as a convergence of materials in flow and transformation (Ingold 437). In doing so, however, he is inattentive to the possibilities of understanding the world in any other way than through matter. Moreover, Ingold and the discourse upon which he elaborates advance their understanding of the world—as a gathering of materials—as a universal truth rather than a worldview specifically located in European rationality. For example, Ingold universalizes his understanding of the Earth by considering materials not only in time, but as "the stuff of time itself" (439). As such, the coloniality of materiality negates and erases the possibilities of worlding that do not disintegrate the Earth into a gathering of materials, as does the worldview reflected by Anton de Kom when he writes about Mother Sranan. Of course, other civilizations have considered the world through materials. However, none of them impinged, appropriated, and capitalized on the globe and its inhabitants as much as Europe did. When speaking of experiences and knowledges outside the limits of western thought, decoloniality does not transcend rationality in some divine, mystical, or fetishistic manner but instead thinks beyond the frameworks of western immanence. In this particular case, speaking from a western institution, we may not be able to rationally grasp the implications of the material in the way De Kom experiences it. This, however, is only because we know that the original paneling has been lost. Therefore, to follow De Kom, modern knowledge and patterns of experience must be unlearned in order to learn to experience materiality in its material absence.

In contrast to previous accounts of materials, the coloniality of materiality considers materials as a disintegration of the Earth and Earth-beings. In doing so, it reveals that the modern conceptualization of the Earth as a gathering of materials is a precondition that enabled Europe to appropriate the Earth and Earth-beings as resources with the potential for extraction. A mountain, for example, only becomes a resource when certain minerals are discovered that can be extracted from it and are capitalized. Similarly, the body was disintegrated into a set of materials when anatomists dissected it into organs and fluids. Subsequently, that same body was turned into a resource when scientists made it possible to transplant those organs and fluids from one body to another. Yet, at what expense does modernity materialize the Earth and Earth-beings? In either case, the "source" is irreparably damaged. Therefore, I would argue, in every material lies the inherent destruction of the Earth.

Vázquez's decolonial path helps us to recognize the mechanisms and processes of the colonial matrix of power that produced European knowledge and experience

as universal. Vázquez's work is, among other things, concerned with the formation of modernity and aims to understand this dominant framework of experience by inquiring into the regulation of the senses (17–18). Following Vázquez, this chapter asks how the Mauritshuis shapes the visitor's experience through the wooden paneling in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. In a wall text about the museum building, the curators describe the situation before the fire: "The Mauritshuis had an impressive interior with paneling made of tropical wood, murals depicting Brazilian landscapes and large quantities of objects that Johan Maurits had brought back with him from Brazil" (Mauritshuis, room 1). Visitors are encouraged to imagine how impressed they would have been if they had stepped into the original interior of the building. This is not so different from the experience of pupils taught in schools, as described by De Kom. The adjective "impressive" forces visitors to imagine the spectacle of the wooden paneling—an aesthetic appreciation that provides them with an overwhelming experience. However, whether this appreciation concerns the materiality of the paneling or its craftsmanship remains uncertain.

A European Story of Brazilwood

Early European settlers in Abya Yala—broadly understood as the Americas—sought eagerly to extract its natural materials. The search for gold is well known through the numerous unsuccessful expeditions to the mythical city or kingdom of El Dorado and from European cultural works describing the quest. Lesser known is the European interest in brazilwood, a generic term for various kinds of hardwood. Throughout the sixteenth century, wood was the main product that Europe imported from Abya Yala. This can be observed in archives when looking at inventories of shiploads brought into the ports of Europe. The Portuguese first used the wood for dying fabrics, and later the material became popular for carpentry. However, the material's significance for Europe becomes even more apparent in European visual culture. Brazilwood acquired a particularly prominent place in the art of the seventeenth-century Dutch Republic.

A few years after architect Jacob van Campen completed the Mauritshuis in 1644, he took charge of the construction of Amsterdam's city hall—presently the Royal Palace of Amsterdam. The front and rear elevations of the building are equipped with marble tympanums designed by Artus Quellinus. Depicted on the rear tympanum, entitled *The Four Continents Paying Homage to Amsterdam*, we can see the personification of Amsterdam accompanied by personifications of the city's rivers Amstel and 't IJ accepting gifts offered by Asia, Europe, Africa, and America. "America" is represented by two men recognizable by their feather headdresses. One is offering a pot of undistinguishable goods; the other is sitting against a tree, offering mats and two tree trunks while smoking a pipe.

Among all these goods, the tree trunk, as a gift from "America," appears to be a recurring motif in Dutch seventeenth-century illustrations. *De nieuwe en onbekende weereld, of beschryving van America en 't zuid-land* (*The New and Unknown World; or, Descriptions of America and the South-Land*, 1671) by Arnoldus Montanus, for example, opens with an engraving by Jacob van Meurs that depicts a gift including a tree trunk by the personification of "America" and her entourage to the Europeans upon their arrival in Abya Yala. The same gift of a tree trunk can be seen in *The Map of Amsterdam with Cityscape* (circa 1682–88) by Johannes Kip and *The Map of Amsterdam* (circa 1674–82), possibly by (or after) Romeyn de Hooghe. Yet another example of the same motif painted by an anonymous artist is the *Allegory of the "Treaty of Friendship and Commerce between the States General of the United Netherlands and the United States of America"* (1782–85). These examples demonstrate that wood was not just another natural material that was taken from Abya Yala to Europe. Through these images, brazilwood acquired a symbolic meaning. To the Europeans, this humbly offered wood symbolized "America's" rich natural materials and the possibility of its extraction for their profit. In other words, the wood represented Abya Yala as a natural resource.

Through this modern reading of brazilwood, we encounter a modern/colonial difference. For, when talking about materials, I mean substances that are produced—and not extracted, because that implies the material foundation of the Earth—from that which De Kom calls Mother Sranan. Materials—including so-called natural or raw materials—such as stone, wood, metal, or leather, only become so through the disintegration and destruction of the Earth and Earth-beings. They only become material, real, or immanent through the artifice of materialization and production. I argue that materials, whether conceptual or produced, are, in fact, always an artifice. Therefore, from now on, this chapter leaves the modern conception of wood as a material and instead understands it as an artifice produced by destroying a tree or a forest. Consequently, the wooden paneling of the Mauritshuis must be understood in relation to the destruction of Mother Sranan.

This understanding of materials as artifice brings us to coloniality and, specifically, to what Vázquez terms "double erasure" (41). While modernity identifies itself as the entire horizon for intelligibility, it negates the historical process of erasing other worlds inherent in its constitution. For the coloniality of materiality, this means concretely destroying the Earth by producing materials. This ruination is negated by the pretension that these substances are extracted as naturally preexisting. In other words, modernity's understanding of the Earth as a gathering of materials erases the destruction of the Earth through the pretension of their natural appearance or immanence without human interference. Subsequently, when attempting to delink oneself from the coloniality of materiality—the effort of undoing the double negation of the destruction of the Earth—we should start

with acknowledging the artifice of understanding the world as a convergence of materials.

The Colonial Difference

Returning to Anton de Kom's experience of the wooden paneling in the Mauritshuis, he draws our attention to another movement in Vázquez's decolonial path: the colonial difference, which marks the separation of the lives experienced through modernity and the lives lived under the conditions of coloniality (Vázquez 17–18). The difference looks at the disjunction between the pleasures and affirmation of modernity on the one hand and the suffering and erasure of others on the other. In no uncertain terms, De Kom links the paneling of the Mauritshuis directly to slavery. As such, he reveals a relationship between black suffering and white enjoyment and how this colonial difference persists to this day. What does this mean with regard to the coloniality of materiality? It highlights that we should not consider the Mauritshuis as a gathering of materials. Instead, the building must be read as an implicated entity entangled in coloniality, the history of slavery, and the destruction of the Earth.

How can this brief decolonial exercise of thinking with Anton de Kom help us delink ourselves from the coloniality of materiality? De Kom prompts his readers to oppose the double erasure of modernity, first by considering the material of the Mauritshuis' interior and not the artifice of aesthetics and craftsmanship. Second, he reminds us that it was the enslaved women who bore "this heavy burden on their head day after day." These women were forced to destroy their Mother Sranan to produce so-called materials, after which Europe could accept without qualm the wood as a grateful gift. This problematizes the Eurocentric idea of the Earth as an accumulation of materials, showing it to downplay the materials' inherent destruction of the Earth and Earth-beings, and thus obfuscates the possibilities to view the world through any means other than the material.

Depending on our positionality and the histories and legacies we bring to the museum, we can each experience the Mauritshuis differently. I arrived at this insight through De Kom's biography of the brazilwood of this building, which paradoxically makes the history of slavery and the destruction of the Earth tangible, even though the material is absent if considered from the perspective of modern epistemology. Although De Kom's statement about the paneling's material was at the time he wrote *We Slaves of Suriname* no longer true, we cannot claim that the conditions of slavery and his experience or imagination are false, nor can we argue that the history of slavery and the destruction of Mother Sranan is obliterated by the fire that destroyed the original wooden paneling. De Kom undoes the double erasure of the coloniality of materiality by reviving the brazilwood in a literary way. As a consequence, the lived experience of slavery can resurge into the museum in the present.

That is where decoloniality begins: with recognizing the possibilities of worlding the world differently.

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