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## America's Indigo Obsession: From Colonial Plantations to Contemporary DIY Ethos

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This research project is, as the title implies, quite broad. It has grown from stories shared generously with me by many of indigo's proponents today, as well as the stories compiled in the historical and ethnographic research of scholars such as Andrea Feeser<sup>1</sup> and Jenny Balfour Paul.<sup>2</sup> This paper was originally written for oration, and what I offer here is a transcript of this talk as performed at the Textile Society of America's 2016 symposium, *Land, Labor and the Port* in Savannah, GA, October 2016. It is an open reflection on some of the stories and broader themes I've encountered in trying to understand American indigo culture past and present. My lens here is decidedly critical, one facet of a much wider view of the project. I begin this paper with an indigo origin story from Liberia, first recorded in print by Esther Warner Dendel<sup>3</sup> and transcribed here in Catherine McKinley's version.<sup>4</sup> This story functions as an allegorical and conceptual foundation for the series of reflections to follow.



Left: Indigo dyed rice in the author's studio. Right: Colonial Glory, installation by Sonja Dahl, installed in *Between: Layering Context and Perception in Patchwork*, curated by Molly Evans Fox. Jelinek Creative Space, Savannah, GA. October 2016. Images courtesy of Sonja Dahl and Molly Evans Fox

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1. Andrea Feeser, *Red, White and Black Make Blue: Indigo in the Fabric of Colonial South Carolina Life* (Athens, GA: The University of Georgia Press, 2013).
  2. Jenny Balfour Paul, *Indigo: Egyptian Mummies to Blue Jeans* (Buffalo, NY: Firefly, 2012).
  3. Esther Warner Dendel, *You Cannot Unsneeze a Sneeze and Other Tales from Liberia* (Niwot, CO: The University of Colorado Press, 1995), 139-140.
  4. Catherine E. McKinley, *Indigo: In Search of the Color that Seduced the World* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2011).

## TO EAT THE SKY

Asi lived in a land with no hunger. Food was abundant, and when people were hungry, they could even eat the sky in little bits. With a scrap of cloud inside of them, people could float and dream and find again the peaceful, joyous feelings that filled them, before High God left the earth to find peace from human comings and goings.

The people, in their loneliness for God, made sacrifices to the spirits of the ancestors and gave them messages to carry to God. Asi was one of the water people, a seeress and a medium. The water spirits wanted Asi among them, and to appease them and calm their powerful pull, she had to make sacrifices to them with each full moon.

One day Asi went to the shrine at the bend of the river with her child tied at her back in a wrapper made of white cloth, a bag of rice balanced on her head. She would cook and eat some of her offering from the sacred spot and leave the rest to the spirits. She made a bed of leaves and laid her child there on her cloth to sleep. As she worked, she saw the color of the sky reflected in the river and felt hunger for that color. She imagined, as she ate a piece of the sky, that the color might come into her. She knew she was forbidden to ask for anything for herself alone, and not for the whole village, at the sacred pools. She knew she must beg forgiveness. But the feeling from the sky was so good, and she felt so drowsy and floating, that she ate more and more of it.

She awoke to the smell of scorched rice. The spirits would be angry with her; she had spoiled the sacrifice she'd come to make. She looked for her child and saw that she had wet the bed and rolled off into the tall grass that grew nearby. The grass had smothered the child. Asi knew that she had been punished for what she had done.

She wailed in sorrow and covered her hair with ash from the fire, as is the custom for mourners. She picked up her child. Then she noticed that the cloth she had lain on was colored with a patch of bright blue. Just then she fell unconscious with grief, and in her dreams the water spirits came to her and revealed that the mixing of the salt of her tears, urine, river water, ash, and the wild indigo leaves that she'd plucked to cushion her child were the secret to God's earthly blues. It had been necessary for the child to die to have had this secret revealed to her.

The water spirits had taken her child; Asi was no longer held by them. She was ordered to guard her secret, to teach the old women how to make blue 'go for down' and stay. She was to teach them the secrets of indigo. Only then would she again conceive and have her child's spirit returned to her.

High God, hearing of this affair, pulled the sky up even higher, where no one could break it off. And people look to the blue of fine cloth and have less need for High God, though in their hearts they remain lonely.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> McKinley, *Indigo*, 229-231.

## DESIRE



Left: google search for “indigo trending”. Right: Indian and “counterfeit” European cloth samples from a slave merchant’s trade book. Image courtesy of Zeeland Archives / MCC Archive

To love indigo is no innocent thing. In many cultures indigo dye is considered a spiritually dangerous and unstable substance, associated with the perishability of both cloth and bodies. Its use is tempered by very specific rituals and rules, attempts to safeguard the susceptible human body from indigo’s subtle powers.

Looking around today in the United States, it seems everyone wants to make and consume true blue. As in Europe’s colonial heyday, indigo is on the rise as a trending substance. But if we take Asi’s story as a cautionary tale, we see that consuming blue, truly incorporating it into ourselves, may prove spiritually dangerous, may require sacrifice.

Liberia, home to Asi’s story, was founded as a country in 1821 by freed African-American slaves and the anti-slavery efforts of the American Colonization Society. Like many other regions of Western Africa, some of Pre Liberia’s tribal groups engaged in the European slave trade, some by force, some willingly. Perhaps the desire for blue that their indigo origin story tells travelled through their collective DNA to reach the wealthy kings and chiefs who gladly accepted the trade of blue cloths from Europeans keen on loading their ships with slaves. The British, whose desire for indigo reached fever pitch in the 18th century, devised an insidious circular logistic to obtain and produce more blue than any other nation: buy with blue cloth the bodies who will inexpensively produce more blue on their American indigo plantations.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>6</sup> This history is widely documented. See Feeser, *Red, White and Black*; Balfour Paul, *Indigo*, as well as the writing of Jean M. West and Colleen Kriger.

What is it exactly about indigo that so fills us with desire or longing that people would go to such lengths to consume it? If indigo truly is the secret to God's earthly blues, the world's only natural colorant able to mimic the unreachable expanses of the sky, perhaps it is true to some extent that we are still looking into its depths in search of transcendence, looking for hints of God...hints of redemption.

Catherine McKinley, author of the research memoir titled *Indigo*, came to the following realization after her time in Ghana: "Indigo is not really a color, it is not cloth. It is only the tangible intangible...it merely materializes the very thin layer between what is seen and unseen, between what can be grasped and what can only be suggested, between the living and the spirit world."<sup>7</sup>

### CONSUMING THE UNCONSUMABLE



Mixing a synthetic, pre reduced indigo vat. Images courtesy of Sonja Dahl.

If one searches for information about indigo online today, a wealth of proclamations await. For example, the trend watch for Dot&Bo states this: "Indigo is more than just a color. It's a mood, a style. This is a trend that's yours for the taking. What you make of it is up to you."<sup>8</sup>

"It's yours for the taking" rings a rather uncomfortable tone in light of our country's early and exploitative relationship with indigo. Similar messages abounded in the many breathless decrees disseminated in fliers and newspaper articles by indigo's early proponents, publications which certainly preceded but perhaps are not so far removed from those we read on many a fervent blogger's site today.<sup>9</sup>

In our desire to eat the sky, what do we neglect? In our love affairs with blue, what do we overlook? Fermented indigo dye requires relationship, it demands devotion and skill. We speak

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<sup>7</sup> McKinley, *Indigo*.

<sup>8</sup> Dodson, Lauren. "#Trending 2015. Dye it with indigo." <http://dotandbo.com>

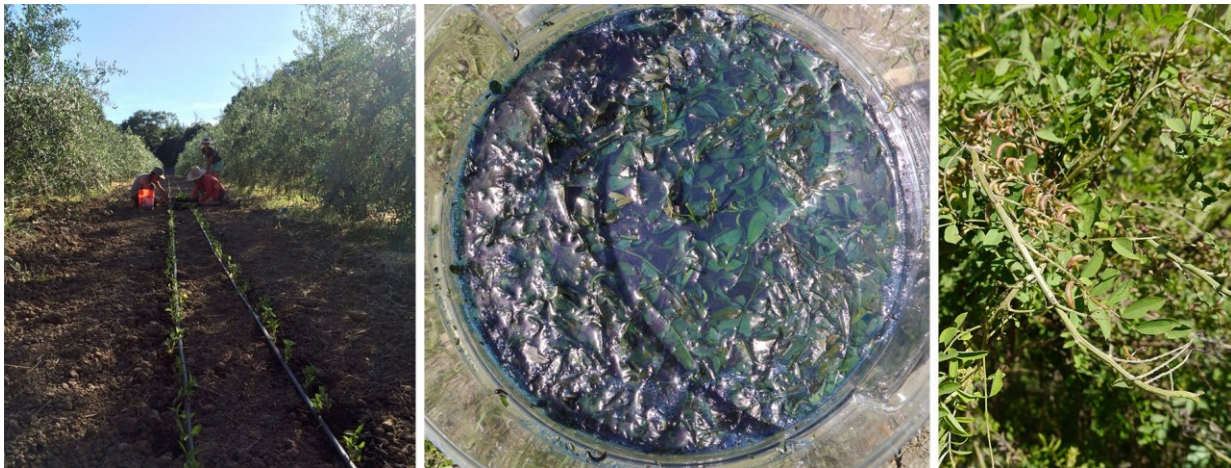
<sup>9</sup> For historical references, see Feeser, *Red, White and Black*. Contemporary blogs featuring writing about indigo include, but are not limited to: <http://spicelines.com/2014/08/31/my-blue-mood-crushing-on-indigo-part-1/>, <https://shiborigirl.wordpress.com/2009/07/04/exploring-derangement/>, <https://blog.etsy.com/en/indigo/>

of indigo in animate terms, of its moods, its hunger, its tiredness or activeness. True indigo is a living being. Of course, one can now buy a packet of blue crystals and within three hours have a functioning impersonation of an organic indigo vat. These synthetic indigo kits are fantastic in their versatility and ease, giving their users a perfectly packaged experience of indigo mysteries.

But with all the glut of hand crafted and mass produced indigo items available on the market, I am critically aware of how indigo functions as a stand in for something deeper in our contemporary consumer culture. Considering its near ubiquity from pop culture and fashion to artists' studios, I wonder is it possible that we are not so much consuming indigo as we are consuming and perpetuating signifiers of its depth, signifiers of other cultures' authenticity, signifiers of a connectedness with Nature's alchemy? Or signifiers of an ever elusive cultural identity of our own?

A number of contemporary artists I've spoken with who make beautiful and thoughtful work with indigo, have confided in me that they no longer feel able to use the dye. Its trendy associations in broader contemporary culture have overpowered their own deeper investigations into the color and substance, causing them to feel that their work is cheapened and rendered superficial in the public eye. Bukola Koiki, a Nigerian American artist was actually told by her largely white grad school cohort during critique that she *could not* use indigo in her work (which referenced traditional Yoruba women's garments), because they believed the color *actually* references trendy American hipster culture.<sup>10</sup>

## LONGING FOR GOD



Left: Volunteers transplanting *polygonum tinctorium* seedlings with Northern California Fibershed member Craig Wilkenson.

Center and Right: Ossabaw Island indigo (*indigofera suffruticosa*), the descendants of indigo plants grown on a former colonial plantation, in the process of making dye during a workshop led by Donna Hardy and the Ossabaw Island Foundation.

Images courtesy of Sonja Dahl.

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<sup>10</sup> Bukola Koiki, personal interview, June 16, 2016.

The United States is a country of immigrants, and many of our plants are immigrants as well. They are brought along in the form of seeds, whose adaptation to new soil is a hopeful metaphor for their human traveling companions. Though there are a number of indigenous strains of wild indigo plants native to this land, the majority of the plants used to grow blue in both the colonial and contemporary eras have been brought from elsewhere. There are indigo plants growing just off the coast here, on Ossabaw Island, whose seeds travelled from Central and South America, were grown as a commercial crop on the plantation once inhabiting the island, and have lived on, reseeded each year, and become naturalized citizens of this land.<sup>11</sup>

Robin Wall Kimmerer, a botanist and member of the Citizen Potawatomi Nation, writes movingly about the deep relationship of reciprocity that native peoples have struggled to maintain with their traditional plants throughout hundreds of years of displacements. She struggles with the question of whether it is possible for us to *become* indigenous to place through our relationships with plants and the land.<sup>12</sup> Too often the “take it and make from it what you wish” mentality leads to destruction of sacred land, the severing of human to nonhuman relationships, and a culturally pervasive sense of unrootedness, of unnamable lack. This condition is sometimes referred to as “species loneliness,” or perhaps it can be described as “the blues.” The sky has been pulled up out of reach and we must look to our material things for a sense of connectedness. In this sense, I can understand why indigo’s transformative magic is especially appealing to people, and why so much of the rhetoric surrounding its contemporary iterations is celebratory, revelatory, and awe filled. I can also understand why people might continue turning their eyes towards other cultures and their lineages of creative handwork in search of whatever elusive thing might alleviate their longing.

But in our reaching for the sky, we must be careful not to forget the responsibility to our offerings here on earth. The author Viet Than Nguyen has asked challenging questions about who owns culture, and who has the right to speak for culture? He says, “It is possible to write [or, by extension, to make art] about others not like oneself, if one understands that this is not simply an act of culture and free speech, but one that is enmeshed in a complicated, painful history of ownership and division that needs to be addressed responsibly.”<sup>13</sup>

One way I perceive increasing numbers of indigo lovers trying to honor their relationships to blue is through actually growing and processing the dye plants themselves. Rowland Ricketts will tell you himself what a huge responsibility such an effort entails.<sup>14</sup> So I am touched by the growing network of people around the country who are sharing indigo seeds with each other, and pushing those little germs of blue into whatever patches of ground they have available. The more

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<sup>11</sup> Donna Hardy, Skype interview, September 11, 2016. See also: The Ossabaw Island Foundation, <http://www.ossabawisland.net/>

<sup>12</sup> Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants* (Minneapolis: Milkweed Editions, 2013).

<sup>13</sup> Viet Thanh Nguyen, “Cultural Appropriation: It’s About More than Pho and Sombreros,” *LA Times*, September 26, 2016, <http://www.latimes.com/books/jacketcopy/la-ca-jc-appropriation-culture-20160926-snap-story.html>.

<sup>14</sup> See “Indigrowing Blue” Facebook group, hosted by Rowland Ricketts, <https://www.facebook.com/groups/128184180528035/>, as well as his personal website, <http://www.rickettsindigo.com/>

of these growers I speak with, the more I sense that, at heart, they are trying to learn a language with which they too can speak with sacred plants. I understand the need to put one's hands into the soil and grow something that gives beauty to the world and meaning to one's life and relationships. For these gardeners and farmers alike, hands stained with both dark earth and dark blue can be prayers made tangible.

## THE BLUE STAIN



*Endless Flight*, by Jovencio de la Paz. Exhibited at Three Walls, Chicago, IL, June 2015.  
Batik, indigo dye, applique on cotton. Images courtesy of Jovencio de la Paz

The iconic image of indigo blued hands, however, does call to mind some emotionally intense archetypes. Jean West points out, for example, that aside from their darker skin, slaves who worked in the American colonial dye houses were easy to identify if they tried to run away, their hands were stained blue.<sup>15</sup>

I hear from multiple indigo workshop instructors that their students show up professing an urgent desire to “get their hands blue.” Just recently a friend sent me a promotional video for a New York fashion designer working with natural dyes and other organic materials. Her message was familiar, full of hope for a more sustainable and natural life, but I was distracted by her perfectly

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<sup>15</sup> Jean M. West, “The Devil’s Blue Dye: Indigo and Slavery,” *Slavery in America*,  
[http://teachers.sumnersd.org/shs/kmcguire/documents/download/indigo\\_and\\_slavery.doc?id=53659](http://teachers.sumnersd.org/shs/kmcguire/documents/download/indigo_and_slavery.doc?id=53659).



dyed blue hands.<sup>16</sup> There is something uncomfortable to me about this flagrant parading of blued skin functioning as a seemingly self aware branding strategy.

Blue was not kind to the bodies of those who labored for it in the colonial American past, so its associations vary widely depending upon the skin that is stained. Kemi Adeyemi writes that “Blue has long been an affect, color, metaphor and strategy that people of color have mobilized to make do under sometimes impossible conditions.” In her exhibition essay for Jovencio de la Paz’s batik series titled *Endless Flight*, she writes that he activates indigo blue “to reimagine the expanses that people continue to traverse in search of different, if not better, lives on the other side of such blueness.”<sup>17</sup>

In Asi’s story, the blue stain is also a marker of loss, activated by actions of mourning. As the first piece of cloth to be dyed blue in the world, that stain marks the birth of a profound sartorial lineage as well. Today, one runs the risk of being stained blue by their own denim jeans, a brilliant and subtle marketing ploy to convince consumers that the synthetic blues in their jeans are actually markers of some kind of authenticity and that such stains bear certain status.

Unfortunately, skin is not the only thing that the blue jeans industry stains. There are disturbing environmental reports from industrial regions in China that produce most of the world’s jeans, including the American superstars Levis. The streets in Xintang are coated in blue dust, rivers run a shade of solid indigo blue, and workers’ lungs are coated in silica dust.<sup>18</sup> Blue jeans, the pants that I myself slip into nearly every day, are one of the world’s biggest polluters.

So what is the connection between the horrors of industrial indigo, past and present, and the plastic buckets of fermenting dyestuff dotting the American social landscape today? Is it even possible to draw a parallel between the individual dyer and the industrial factory?

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<sup>16</sup> Jamie Feldman, “This Designer Uses Flower Waste to Make Truly Magical Clothing,” *Huffington Post*, September 07, 2016, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/sustainable-waste-clothing\\_us\\_57c5cc57e4b0cdfc5ac9ab1c](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/sustainable-waste-clothing_us_57c5cc57e4b0cdfc5ac9ab1c).

<sup>17</sup> Kemi Adeyemi, “Jovencio de la Paz: Endless Flight,” exhibition publication (Three Walls, Chicago IL).

<sup>18</sup> *Need To Know* Facebook page, <https://www.facebook.com/Need-To-Know-578412665673596/?fref=ts>

## REDEMPTION



Left: woven cotton cloth dyed in Javanese indigo during the author's Fulbright research in Indonesia, 2013 (Image courtesy of Sonja Dahl). Right: Black Lives Matter emblem, courtesy of SURJ (Standing Up for Racial Justice).

There is much in indigo's global history that begs redemption. We are still struggling today as a country to rid ourselves of the stain of racism spreading outwards from those first exchanges of blue cloth for black lives. We clothe ourselves daily in cloth that destroys ecosystems and human lives on the other side of the world, and yet still carries that indelible stamp of "American cool." In his own reckoning with indigo's heavy history anthropologist Michael Taussig writes that "Redemption can never be final because the gap between the old and the new can never be closed."<sup>19</sup>

The implications here are that time is linear, an increasing series of gaps between moments that cannot be bridged. But if we instead accept indigenous understandings that time is circular, we see, as Robin Wall Kimmerer has written, that "stories are both history and prophecy, stories for time yet to come. If time is a turning circle, there is a place where history and prophecy converge."<sup>20</sup>

So, while we cannot take back indigo's uglier history or the psychic stains it has left on the bodies of some of our country's people, we can choose to acknowledge that history and dedicate ourselves to critical, intentional, and generous cultivation of indigo culture. Hopefully then, with minds and bodies attuned to the task, we can open up blues as universal as the sky above all of us and deep as the oceans surrounding us. Blues that are the earth's gift to us, meant to be shared, meant to be passed along.

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<sup>19</sup> Michael Taussig, *What Color is the Sacred?* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2009), 144.

<sup>20</sup> Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass*, 206-207.

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