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# Grand Blue Mother

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Artist

iris yirei hu, *Phosphene, Macular Degeneration, Grandmother Dragon, and Joy Plant* (2019). Acrylic, oil, paracord, and embroidery floss on indigo dyed hemp textile, 111 in. x 86 in. (Courtesy of artist, photo credit: John Michael Kohler Arts Center, Sheboygan, Wisconsin)

Some time ago, she was born somewhere between blue and the mountains over there. To understand what I could, I arrived at mother indigo, a magical substance of redemption and grief. I learned about the blues by reaching into the Internet, where I learned to long for something I did not know. To begin s(ee)ing the blues, I imagined her dead, and the dead before her.

Over the Internet, I reach across the Pacific, into the web of lifetimes from which written accounts have become the only currency with which to navigate historical knowledge. What I retrieved in return was the modern travel guide, a tourism degree, and the ethnographer's lens. In English narration, I found a semblance of her in the 2009 CCTV News International Travelogue Program, "Ethnic Odyssey," a 17-part series documenting the minorities of

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China.[1] In one episode, Miao customs, dress, architecture, eating habits, and related reading were packaged and reduced me as the state's official other.

My grandmother, in her dementia and failing health, spends 18 hours of the day sleeping in a hospital bed at a nursing home for the elderly with mental illness, connected to an oxygen tank. In her preparation to become an ancestor, she is unable to show me the blues. When she was lucid, she spent her lifetime distancing herself from the blues, and in turn, she suffered the grief of rupture. Penalized for being born Miao under Han-majority rule during the Chinese Civil War, my grandmother's family arranged her marriage to my Han grandfather at 16. In a change of fate, they became refugees and fled. She chose to exorcise her Miao roots in a grueling struggle to belong by dawning the cloak of assimilation. I map her loss through the tools of the colonial ethnographer, the lens of institutionalized distance with which I've grown to inhabit as a product of the modern university. I long for a transformational, sacred resolve, but the structural dependence on rationalism and science overpowers the spiritual journey that is making life. For now, my understanding of my grandmother is guided through the fragments of self-directed research.

The blue plant, of which there are many species including the *Strobilanthes cusia* and *Persicaria tinctoria* among others, bleeds blue in the presence of oxygen. The mystical indigo arrives to us through many creation stories, beliefs, and rituals that defy mono-theistic virtue and its finite origin. Various oral traditions are kept within clans and villages, and what appear to be similar motifs may carry vastly different meanings depending on geography, time, and the community of makers. What strikes me is that, according to some sources, menstruating women must keep their distance from the indigo vat when blood passes through them. In one creation story, a Miao clan has said that the indigo plant grew from the eyebrows of a mythical grandfather. What remains true throughout disparate meanings across the world is that the blue plant is just as alive as you are, breathing since time immemorial.

Once fermented, a soluble dye vat is created wherein the mother indigo "flowers," and to "flower," the experienced dyer removes oxygen from the liquid with a reduction agent such as sugar. Blue's bitterness requires some sweetness, after all. The vat, depending on the method, will be murky and green, and a substrate submerged under the liquid, transforms only in the presence of air. The more times you dip, the denser the blue. It is a skill that requires a spiritual and rigorous undertaking. I see the dye vat as the ancestral underworld, containing a myriad of stories and lifetimes I will never know. It is a portal into a magical world, in which tribes, clans, and villages are brought together through material and song by this wonderous blue substance. It is also a portal into a nefarious world, in which people were severed from their homelands and corralled into the hands of slavery, war, and execution. The plump, frothy, and blue flower that glides the coppery green surface is a beauty so regal. I puncture the primordial mother with my fingers and am devoured by the longing of loss. The vat, an interlocking net of bubbling connections, s(ee)ings to me a different blue each time.

The chemical revolution of the nineteenth century crystalized the distinction between natural, organic, and synthetic. Fructose sugar, pickling lime, and indigo are what I use to dye. I get my ingredients packaged and shipped to me from a natural dye store in Washington state. With crystalized substances, I remake the blues that my grandmother cannot s(ee)ing. The natural way of indigo was lost in my family even before my

grandmother came into being. I learned of the Miao blues, songs passed down from elders of dreams about a homeland lifetimes away, through the lyricism of a Hmong poet.[2] From a podcast,[3] her voice reminds me of our distantly related grief, and reifies the poetry of the impossible, where abstraction and improvisation find themselves in our longing to grow near the womb of the primordial mother. Upon their dispossession over the course of millenia, proximity to redemption is sacred and to be remade. Our indigo mother spills out to the sea of unspoken dreams, finds me in her nebulous reach, and floats away along with my grandmother's eternal sleep.

## Notes

1. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=If0BDSxTvM8&list=PL1C2777F02A3D63E6&index=26.
2. Khaty Xiong (https://khatyxiong.com) was born to Hmong refugees from Laos. She is the author of *Poor Anima* (Apogee Press, 2015), the first full-length collection of poetry published by a Hmong American woman in the United States.
3. Seeing Color Podcast with Zhiwan Cheung, Episode 64: Hmong Blues (with Khaty Xiong), March 30, 2021, https://seeingcolorpod.com/2021/03/30/episode-64-hmong-blues-w-khaty-xiong/.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## Notes on contributor

*iris yirei hu* is an artist who paints, weaves, dyes, tells stories, and composts her lived reality into installations, public artworks, and intercultural-generational-and-geographical collaborations. She often works in community with artists, scientists, historians, keepers of traditions, and organizers to limn connections between people, places, and practices to explore possibilities of kinship.