(De)colonial Blues
by Tessa Laird

Like the Mediterraneans, ancient Mexicans harvested purple dye from sea snails, although they were "milked" rather than crushed, and returned to the sea. On an excursion to observe the natural source of this fabled dye, colour writer Victoria Finlay finds that the clear liquid the *caracolas* exude undergoes a series of transformations upon exposure to air. Morphing from white, to pale yellow, to green, blue, and finally purple, the dye undergoes an alchemical sequence, like a bubbling vat of indigo, or a Polaroid magically taking shape in your hand. If someone had found a way to fix this chemical reaction, Finlay suggests, the world's first photographs would have been of Aztec rituals in an ancient, purple haze.[1]

Finlay isn't the only author to have imagined an alternative history, where Indigenous recording technologies preexisted those of their colonisers. Film theorist Hollis Frampton wrote of a discovery of three caches of "proto-American artefacts" at Oaxaca and Tehuantepec, their contents comprising 75,000 copper "solar emblems" looking suspiciously like film reels, each wound with 300 metres of "a transparent substance, uniformly 32 millimeters wide" made of "dried and flattened dog intestine".[2] This archaic celluloid is divided into squares, each bearing a hand-painted pictogram, and is illuminated by sunlight, "led indoors by an intricate system of mirrors."[3]

I wanted to believe Frampton's apocryphal tale, just as I wanted to believe the fabulation accompanying Tracey Moffatt's film *The White Ghosts Sailed In* at the Venice Biennale in 2017. In an interview between Moffatt and Simone Brett, historian at the South Pacific Film Archives in Canberra, Moffatt announces she has found a 200-year-old film in a former Aboriginal Mission in Sydney. When Brett seems skeptical about a film predating the accepted timeline of the medium's invention, Moffatt assures her that a proto-film did exist in those days. In fact, Joseph Banks, Captain Cook's chief botanist, left an early film camera with an Aboriginal mob, because the Endeavour was "too weighed down".[4] Thus, when Captain Arthur Phillip and the First Fleet sailed in on 26 January, 1788, a local Aboriginal camera crew was recording. Like Frampton, Moffatt continues her ruse with details of facture: the film was made from animal glue (melted down pigs hooves), then dipped in gunpowder. But the film itself is less of a joke. Grey vistas of sea and sky, shadows and a palpable anticipatory horror ghost the screen.

In a similar gesture to Frampton and Moffatt, Kate Golding uses early photographic techniques to image the traces left by Cook, in Australia and beyond. Cook's ghost haunts the South Pacific, as his supposedly scientific pursuits, both botanical and astronomical, led to the rapid colonisation of all the lands he surveyed. Cook's crew intended to witness the Transit of Venus from Tahiti, an important and rare astronomical event.[5] It is ironic that the Captain whose guiding star was Venus, goddess of love, was killed on Valentine's Day, especially given the often lecherous colonial attitude towards Pacific bodies.

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[1] Victoria Finlay, *Colour: Travels Through the Paintbox,* London: Sceptre, 2002, 424
[2] Hollis Frampton, "A Stipulation of Terms from Maternal Hopi", *Circles of Confusion: film, photography, video: texts, 1968-1980*, Rochester, N.Y.: Visual Studies Workshop Press, 1983, 171-2
[3] Ibid
[4] Tracey Moffatt and Simone Brett, "The White Ghosts Sailed In", *Tracey Moffatt: My Horizon*, edited by Natalie King, Surry Hills, NSW: Australia Council for the Arts; Port Melbourne, Victoria: Thames & Hudson Australia, 2017, 113
[5] Lisa Reihana's *In Pursuit of Venus (Infected)*, 2015-17, was also at the 2017 Venice Biennale, and has proved to be one of the most poignant and complex portrayals of this colonial encounter to date.

Golding has visited the sites of Cook's birth and death, in England and the Kingdom of Hawai'i respectively, and displays her cyanotypes of these memorial sites hung out like dirty laundry. Positive and negative, right side up and upside down, they seem to indicate that there is no one point of purchase on these events. Her use of the cyanotype and other cameraless techniques bring to mind the unsettled nature of history, as her works continue to shift over time. Like fugitive dyes, cyanotypes also change colour when exposed to sunlight, fluxing from green to grey. When bathed in water, a rich blue emerges, recalling their use by engineers as literal "blueprints" – construction plans, harbingers of change.

Blue is hopelessly entangled with colonial histories, not least with the manufacture of indigo in India during British rule, where Gandhi's first civil actions were on behalf of indigo workers.[6] Michael Taussig connects the indigo vats of Bengal to "the intense deep blue of the ocean in stormy weather"[7], and it is no wonder that blue is the colour of sailors, including Cook himself, always depicted in resplendent blue. When Golding went to Bunnings to colour match a cyanotype print, the closest shade of blue was called "Admiralty". Napoleon, for his part, made blue "the colour of war",[8] and then it became the colour of police the world over. All these blue-clad men were and still are convinced of their own "civilising" influence, despite evidence to the contrary.

In his 1881 treatise "On the Colour Sense of the Maoris"(sic), Christian missionary William Colenso compared the complex colour terminology of the "old Maoris" to the simplified imported lexicon of the Pākehā (white Europeans). Apart from sea and sky, there was little blue in the Māori world, but Pākehā brought with them "blue jackets, blue shirts, blue trousers, and blue caps!"[9] Colenso lists all the various fabrics and garments of blue that the Mission introduced to the community, noting how inventive Maori were in naming these new shades, including, for a faded blue-grey fabric, *tupapaku* or corpse. But, he laments, "all those several colours of blue, each bearing a distinct name among them, were shut up by the European under one horrid term of *pimru* – blue".[10] Subsequently, Māori started speaking an increasingly impoverished tongue, one which was in danger of fading altogether, like a *tupapaku*, or the insipid shade of the infamous "dying pillow" that the colonists were urged to smooth,[11] until the Māori Renaissance of the 1970s and 80s.

All these stories figure loss as something fading, like an old photograph, or a torn piece of indigo-dyed fabric. But in this murky, fugitive space of chemical ambiguity, new stories can emerge, complicating and challenging the narratives we have learned by rote, and scratching away at the patina of a history that is only 250 years old.

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[6] Michael Taussig, *What Colour is the Sacred?* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009, 147
[7] Ibid, 141
[8] Ibid, 155-6
[9] Colenso, William. *On the Colour-sense of the Maoris*. Christchurch: Kiwi Publishers, (1881) 2001, 20-21
[10] Ibid
[11] In 1856, New Zealand politician Dr I E Featherson, determined that Māori were doomed to die out, expressed that the best good colonists could do was to "smooth down their dying pillow". 'Dr Isaac Earl Featherston', from *An Encyclopaedia of New Zealand*, edited by A H McLintock. Te Ara – the Encyclopedia of New Zealand, http://www.TeAra.govt.nz/en/1966/featherston-dr-isaac-earl