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Indigo Witness: Gathering Around those Others Not Human

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Abstract

While attending the second trial of the *Court for Intergenerational Climate Crimes* (*CICC*), as well as two subsequent workshops, I focus my attention on the indigo plant at the centre of the room. The trial details that for more than a century indigo was hyper-cultivated in a nascent system of extractive capitalism that sought to wrest produce, wealth and sovereignty from the Indian people and transfer it to British investors and, later, the British Crown. Underlying this deeply seated system of exploitation of multi-species labour is a reductivist conception of a deadened 'nature' so prevalent in neo-Cartesian, capitalist and extractive colonial economies. This article, then, is interested in asking what happens when we not only resist those damaging perspectives in general, but also focus on acknowledging nonhuman intelligence, creativity and agency within the trial itself? Following in the lineage of Val Plumwood, Graham Harvey and other new animists, as well as numerous Indigenous populations, I consider what it means to centre the 'earth others' also present at this gathering; one that is concerned with examining the cultivation, transportation and commercialisation of plant and human bodies and labour. Indeed, how can we take indigo's participation at the *CICC* as seriously as we will take the prosecutors, historians and scholars speaking on the stage? If indigo is here as a participant, here with its own intelligence and history, and here to witness the proceedings along with the rest of us, then how can we witness the ways in which indigo, itself, is also participating in the act of gathering?

Keywords: agency; AGRA; animism; Court for Intergenerational Climate Crimes; east india company; indigo; more than human rights; palestine action; post colonialism; wallich collection

Indigo Witness: Gathering Around those Others Not Human

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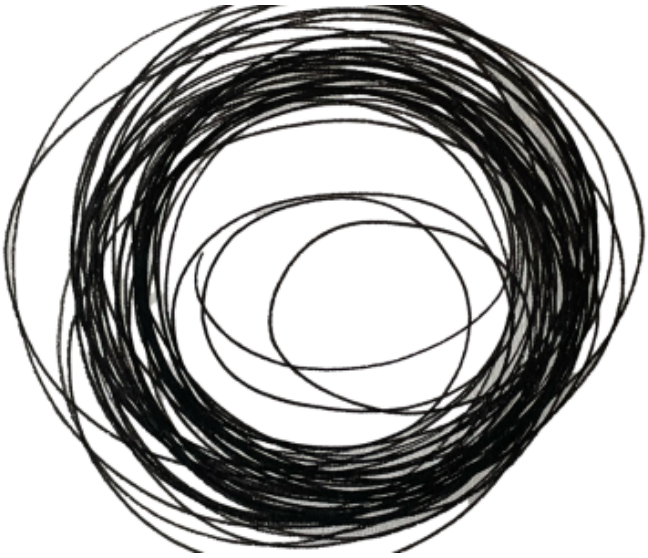


The first thing you notice as you descend the steps into the basement space of Ambika P3 – the site for the third edition of the *Court for Intergenerational Climate Crimes* (*CICC*) – is the stage in fluorescent yellow, the symbolic colour of regeneration. Once your eyes have adjusted to the brightness of the set dressing within the darkness of the venue, it is the indigo plant at the centre of the stage that makes itself known. The plant is around 1.5 meters tall, spreading out across an area of maybe double that. It is not in leaf, mostly stems and stalk, and its seeds are scattered on the floor below. It is rooted in a high mound of soil inside a custom-cut hole in the floor. Not only is the indigo at the centre of this vibrant stage, it's also at the precise centre of the room, and its presence is undeniable. I stop halfway down the metal steps at the entrance of the court so I can briefly take in the scene of the trial which has just begun. Everything in the room faces the plant: each chair and screen, each piece of art. Human bodies are collected around the stage, around the indigo. Everyone is sitting in silence with their eyes to the middle.

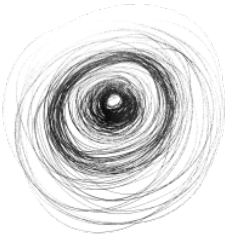
It's an effort to 'decentralise this assembly from its prioritisation of human animals over any other living beings', says Jonas Staal, the artist and co-convener of the court along with Professor of Law, Radha D'Souza. The two of them have composed this space so that those who are gathered inside – members of the Public Jury – cannot forget those others occupying the space as well. In many ways, it's a presentation of

the basic idea that plants are both central to the nature of the crimes that we are investigating and, perhaps implicitly, central to any of us being here in the first place: 'In this court, we do not differentiate between the human and nonhuman' says D'Souza in her opening statement. In fact, she emphasises, as we gather, we do so both around and alongside those with whom we live. In their design of this setting, the two creators of this court are telling us from the very beginning that within their gathering spaces, they do not simply elevate those humans standing on stages with microphones on their bodies; rather, they also choose to centre those others whose voices sound different to ours, whose noises might not get heard by our ears, whose ways of being are loud yet often described by Eurocentric cultures as silent (if they're described at all).

Much of the work of this iteration of the *CICC* is focussed on the exploitation of labour. It homes in on indentures and debt traps and the multi-generational destruction of lives and livelihoods by the East India Company (EIC) between 1600 and 1858. As we shall hear, the company's strategies of governance have seeped into systems of power and production that are still in use today, whether that's by Shell, Unilever or AGRA (formerly known as the Alliance for Green Revolution in Africa). The indigo plant at the centre of this three-day trial – as well as the other plants, whose images loom over the proceedings from a series of large light-boxes surrounding the court, such as tea, opium, jute and cotton – were hyper-cultivated in a nascent system of extractive capitalism that sought to wrest produce, wealth and sovereignty from the Indian people and transfer it to British investors and, later, the British Crown. It was a system of exploitation of multi-species labour, and it is within that expanded premise of labour that the plants who watch over this court – as well as the human people who speak to it – are refereed to throughout as 'comrade'.

The use of 'comrade' here seems to foreground labour (or the labourer) as a unifying act (or identity) across species, singling it out as something that both humans and nonhumans perform throughout their lives, and through which they are therefore in solidarity. In this way, the term sets the scene for the performance of solidarity that is the *CICC* and makes a gesture towards an environmental politics of work. Speaking to me on the phone after the trial, Staal articulates that, for him, the word '"comrade" politicises ecological relationships', moving us away from the pacification of 'nature' as a realm that humans should 'protect' and towards a relationship of mutual respect involving labour of all kinds. This dualistic thinking that Staal is pushing back against is also apparent in the legacy left by the centuries-long collusion between the EIC and the British Crown, and their deadly impact which, by now, exists on a planetary scale. In its broadest sense, the story we hear here is not one of violences on a specific species, but it is an international, intergenerational and interspecies story of omnicide.

D'Souza finishes her introduction to the first court session with a request to participants to remain active in this trial, rather than passive observers. While we are here, she says, we ask you to engage with the role of Public Jury. And that, as a jury, we might gather with the intention of deciding collectively what it is that we stand for; what is acceptable to us and what is not. The function of the *CICC* is as a kind of shadow court for injustices which our legal systems refuse to acknowledge (let alone prosecute). As D'Souza (2018) argues in her book, *What's Wrong with Rights?*, we must place the law itself on trial, because, in failing to either prevent or prosecute environmental violences on a planetary scale, the law shows itself to be severely lacking. In its place, this court asks if we might start reimagining legal practice as a counter-hegemonic collective endeavour based on scholarship and history; based on research, compassion and testimony from our living and our dead.



I arrive at the *CICC* as someone interested in the ways in which the human might foster collaborative and equitable relationships with 'earth others' (Plumwood 2002: 44). My perspective is informed by a philosophical and ethical animism that, for me, emerges out of eco-feminist theories that critique dualistic patriarchal hegemonies, whereby 'nature' and 'woman' are both subordinated on one side of the contrived binary. These ideas are themselves strongly informed by those Indigenous communities who still practice their own versions of animism and without whom this scholarship could not exist. Indeed, the term 'philosophical animism' (as opposed to just 'animism') was introduced by the environmental philosopher and eco-feminist, Val Plumwood, in her 2008 paper, 'Nature in the Active Voice'. Her paper was written with the intention of offering a means of 'thinking differently' (Plumwood 2015: 449) about environmental philosophy's position as an anthropocentric practice of scholarship, and Plumwood implores her reader to instead engage with the creative intelligence of the world so often overlooked by the approaches of, for example, scientism.

Indeed, there is much to reclaim when it comes to animism. The word itself was coined by the armchair anthropologist Edward Tylor in 1871 and has since been used to misrepresent a wide range of broadly Indigenous views (Harvey 2017a: 7). Tylor's construction of animism largely describes the 'projection' of life onto 'inanimate' objects by so-called 'primitive' cultures. This was accompanied by the claim that animism is a perspective that 'civilised societies' had 'grown out of' (Beyer 2010: 112). Plainly put, Tylor's project of animism inside colonial academia (in particular anthropology) has contributed to, and provided justification for, both racist and violent acts on peoples and places whose cultures sat outside of Europe and the post-Enlightenment West. With excruciating irony, these also happen to be many of the same cultures, places and people who are now being solicited for philosophical guidance by the same institutional structures.

The word 'animism' is an etic one, most often used to refer to a set of cultural and spiritual practices with and within an animate world – which might be defined as a world full of agential beings including plants, rocks, rivers, mountains and ancestors. Post-Tylor, it was re-conceived within Western academia by Nurit Bird-David (1999: 568) who developed a notion of animism as a 'relational epistemology' with specific reference to Irving Hallowell's (1960) conversation with an Anishinaabe (Ojibwa) elder in the early 1900s. Since then, it has become a kind of broad term for Indigenous ontologies that interact with the realm of 'nature' as an agential, creative, intelligent (series of) being(s). More recently still, animism has become a field of Western philosophical, anthropological and ecological enquiry, exploring and explaining relational practices between humans and 'nature', one often described as being built on respect and cooperation, and seen now as particularly crucial during a period of climate breakdown and ongoing mass extinction. Graham Harvey has been hugely influential in this development of animism and coined a (now widely used) definition that, again, very specifically relates to Hallowell's interaction with the Anishinaabe elder:

'Animists', writes Harvey (2017a: xvii), 'are people who recognise that the world is full of persons, only some of whom are human, and that life is always lived in relationship with others'.

In my own writing and making practices, animism remains a term that I use with care (and often a good deal of introduction), because, as Isabelle Stengers (2012: n.pag.) remarks in *Reclaiming Animism:* 'I must acknowledge that my own practice and traditions [of Western scholarship] situate me on one side of the divide, the side that characterised "others" as animists'. In line with Stengers, therefore, as I bring my specific relationship to philosophical animism to this piece of writing, I do so as one who acknowledges the Tylorian conception that has come before, while remaining lucid about my own positioning as an Anglo-European working within academic traditions. This is, in fact, one of the reasons I was drawn to Plumwood's eco-feminist use of the term in the first place, because, as Patrick Curry (2010: 10) articulates, it endeavours to move beyond the 'colonial contempt' that thinking around animism has/d become so embroiled in. Curry was open to Plumwood's terminology because, 'since we cannot revert to being pre-colonial natives [...] "philosophical animism" for us post-colonial Earth-indigenes seems about right'.

My endeavour as an artist is always to undermine the reductivist conception of deadened 'nature' so prevalent in neo-Cartesian, capitalist and extractive economies, preferring instead to acknowledge nonhuman intelligence, creativity and agency. For me, for Plumwood, for Harvey and for other new animists, but above all for those Indigenous populations whose wisdom I, too, seek out: to recognise 'earth others' is to recognise agency, and to recognise agency is to engage with wants and needs. So, as I stand on the metal steps of Ambika P3, about to attend a trial that is concerned with the cultivation, transportation and commercial production of the 'earth other' indigo, I turn my attention specifically to the centre of the space. I allow my focus to remain on the indigo in the room. I attend this trial as someone interested in what happens at gatherings when nonhumans are truly centred. Indeed, how can I take indigo's participation in this trial as seriously as I will take the prosecutors, historians and scholars speaking on the stage? If indigo is here as a participant, here with its own intelligence and history, here to witness the proceedings and to gather in solidarity like the rest of us, then my attempt will be to witness the ways it's with us. I will focus on indigo the plant species, and, more specifically, the indigo plant in attendance.

The first recorded use of the words 'indigo plant' was, according to Merriam-Webster (2025: n.pag.), in 1712, and it is no coincidence that this also happens to be precisely the high-point (and halfway point) of the East India Company, which had existed for one hundred years by then and would have around another one hundred years to go. As the emergence of these words into the English language implies, the beginning

of the eighteenth century is the period when the indigo plant was most prevalent in European trade practices, when it was being processed in large quantities for its blue dye and transported around the world. Indigo scholar and this trial's first expert witness Ghulam A. Nadri reminds us that the word 'indigo' is, of course, the coloniser's word. In Bengal and northern India the common word for this plant is *neel*. In Gujarat, it is called *gali*. It was the Europeans who called it 'indico' or 'indigo' as a means of describing the colour of its dye — in other words, its product.

Here, then, is evidence of the legacies of naming practices of colonial science, which were often undertaken with no consideration for – or were actively pursuant of – the eradication of existing Indigenous and folk names for plants and animals (and thereby existing relationships). Uriel Orlow's project *What plants were called before they had a name* (2017), acknowledges this 'epistemic violence within botany and science' (Orlow, 2025: n.pag.), with particular regard to taxonomic practices and their catastrophic impact on the relationships between people and their land. For this project, Orlow's research is concerned with a publication by the *Instituto Indigenista de Guatemala*, in which all the plant names are, in fact, in the colonisers' language of Spanish.

The EIC also took great interest in Indian botanics and acquired their own botanic collection over several decades. Initially, much of it was sent to the India Museum in London, but a huge archive was also gathered at the Calcutta Botanic Garden. This project was led by the superintendent of the Calcutta Botanic Garden, Nathaniel Wallich, who shipped the collection in its entirety to England, where he taxonomised over 11,000 plants in a rented house in Soho (Noltie and Watson, 2021: n.pag.). Working with a group of European taxonomists, Wallich unloaded 30 barrels of 'specimens' weighing 20 tons and set about curating his collection by 'identifying specimens, giving them names (there was no time to provide these with descriptions) and sorting them'. (Noltie and Watson, 2021: n.pag.)

The indigo 'specimen' that was shipped to London in 1828 is shown in a ten-foot frame positioned around the perimeter of the *CICC* at Ambika P3. It takes the form of a high-resolution, highly detailed photograph of an indigo plant held at the Wallich Collection at Kew Gardens. The image, as I view it, is one of violence and submission. The plant's stems look torn and white tags hold it down to a sheet of paper. At first glance, the tags look like bandaging, or the kind of fastening you might associate with an image of a Victorian patient strapped to a gurney. It is palpably an image of struggle, as are the other images of plants that stand collected around the edges of the space, lit from the back, and acting as both illuminators in the darkness that shrouds the outer edges of the room and as overseers of proceedings. These are also plants that were both exploited and used as a means of exploitation by the EIC, and they are witnesses testifying to that abuse. These plants are the ancestors of those others alive today, including the living indigo in the centre of the room. They are the plants who witnessed their own abductions, were witnesses to crimes of forced displacement, to their own uprooting and forced labour, obligatory propagation and cultivation. These images of plants in ten-foot frames were witness to the practices this trial is concerned with, and are now witnessing the trial in the present. Their ghostly images gather with and alongside us, reaching across history as participants in a collective effort to engage in interspecies and intergenerational justice-seeking.

The case before the court – the second case of a three-

case trial – is titled ‘The Indigo Trade, the East India Company and the British Crown: Establishing Agribusiness, Destroying Interdependent Ecologies’. This trial will also look across history, seeking to establish a link between the tools, stratagems and violences of the EIC and the ways in which they still perpetuate in contemporary agro-economies. On stage, Nadri tells us how the British Raj saw the local population as ‘docile and meek’, and I wonder if this might be the psychological foundation required for the kind of imperial mentality that seeks conquest over land and those who live within it. In turn, this might be the first stepping stone on the way to colonial racism; the preliminary requirement for military and/or corporate infrastructure to be moved into and onto place in order to dominate all that is there. In this instance, the EIC did both, while also employing a form of indentured labour based on obligation and indebtedness for ‘unrequited’ trade projects, beneficial to their own corporation and its state backer. Throughout the eighteenth century, the British Raj used tools of oppression to rob Indian indigo cultivators of their own sovereignty and, I would suggest, thereby also robbing indigo of its own sovereignty too. Nadri points to the indigo in front of him, which ‘may look dry and pinkish here’, he says, ‘but in a tropical summer it would grow lush, green leaves, producing a beautiful blue dye’. It is a gentle reminder to his audience that this plant is not native to, nor best suited for, this country and its climate.

The indigo trade was one of the most lucrative endeavours the EIC embarked on. Pre-colonial India did produce indigo but the EIC and the British Crown increased the scale of production beyond precedent and, in order to do this, designed a supply chain that was also exploitative. Indeed, not only did the cultivation of indigo directly result in the devastation of vast areas of interdependent human and nonhuman ecosystems including native forests, but it also left each individual indigo cultivator indebted to the Raj. The contracts these labourers were forced to sign ensured that debt would not – *could not* – be relieved after death, and therefore the children of growers were saddled with the obligation of their family’s work: ‘Whole generations were given over, bound hand and foot, to the factories’, wrote F.E.C. Linde (1882: 4). If the debts were not consistently repaid, Nadri tells us, the Raj used violence, imprisonment and the destruction of property as its means of punishment.

Following Nadri’s presentation, Kenyan social justice activist Leonida Odongo points to the corresponding exploitations of agri-business in Africa today, namely the practices of AGRA. AGRA is an organisation charged by this court with lobbying member governments to outlaw traditional seeds, making farmers dependent on commercially produced alternatives to those they already have, as well as on the agrochemicals that the new seeds ‘require’. In addition, the Kenyan land originally stolen from the local population by British colonialists is now being used by multinational agribusiness corporations rather than, say, being returned to the communities who have long cultivated it. In short, AGRA is accused of stealing

land and seed, and leasing both back to those whom they have robbed. Odongo explains that this has resulted in the theft of cultural customs too: to steal the rights of seeds is to steal food sovereignty and the corresponding traditions that come with it. Over time, she tells us, local people have lost the ability to grow the types of food traditionally served at marriages, or those customarily consumed by lactating mothers, to name two examples. As was the case with the EIC, this is a contrived system that creates a debt-trap in order to exploit farmers who either inherit their families' debts, or are manipulated (often at a young age) into using AGRA's seeds or tools, and/or are simply left without any option but to become ensnared in AGRA's farming infrastructure. Simply put, Kenyan farmers are left needing to buy seeds and chemicals from AGRA rather than having the autonomy to grow their own seeds and use locally produced fertiliser. As well as this, AGRA also seeks influence and power through means of legislative protections for 'intellectual property' of modified seed, and funds programmes that train scientists to perpetuate food production systems based on their own agro-chemicals, fertilisers and genetically modified organisms (GMOs). These monopolising systems ensure the lasting influence and impenetrable control of organisations such as AGRA, with labour and production sealed inside a multi-generational system of indebtedness: land and the multiple species who inhabit it are held hostage to large corporations.

AGRA is yet another example of the kind of conscious coupling of corporation and state that was so 'successful' for the British colonisers in India, alleges Ruth Nyambura, a Kenyan feminist and activist-scholar speaking as Advocate for the Court following Odongo's witness statement. Her account is, once again, of a system built on the capture of working people (and plants) and held up by corporate colonial structures of governance. In both cases, the company-state alliance forces workers to abandon their own traditional, local and sustainable growing or consuming practices and replaces them with large-scale agribusiness models that seek influence and the transfer of wealth. In both cases, local knowledge is labeled has 'backward' and land, histories and ecologies are erased. In their place come corporate strategies. The EIC forced many communities to abandon their own land and turn their attention to the indigo cultivation programme. When this was not done through force, it simply happened as a consequence of the demands that indigo cultivation placed on their energy and attention. The colonial cash crops – whether indigo, tea, rubber or jute – were grown at such scale that their cultivation eventually usurped the areas of land that had previously been designated for rice and wheat — the primary means for workers to feed themselves. During the life of the EIC, approximately 1.4 million acres of forest were destroyed to make room for indigo cultivation, with 60,000 acres cleared in a single year. Not insignificantly, the people who were forced to clear the forest were those who lived within it – those whose home it was. These were the people who knew it best and, therefore, the ones who had the strongest relationship to it. It is difficult to imagine the damage this might do to both one's sense of home or belonging, let alone one's sense of autonomy. The EIC's forceful implementation of indigo production would damage ecosystems, habitats, communities and livelihoods both then and for many years to come.

As I listen to this trial, I hear a portrayal of a rupture. I wonder what this period of history might have done to the relationship between people and their home and all who live there. I wonder, specifically, what it would have done to the relationship between those labourers working with the indigo and the indigo plant itself, and whether they experienced a sense of separation between themselves and this 'earth other' who had been part of their lives and communities for generations. The indigo and the indigo cultivator were, it seems, held captive inside an industrial system that benefitted neither; one in which a corporation-state forced humans into the abuse of their own land, while abusing them at the same time. One imagines that during

this period, these interspecies relationships might easily – and understandably – have teemed with resentment, become full of pain and obligation and blame. The colonised growers' relationship to the indigo plant might understandably have become a relationship whereby the coloniser's objectifying and commodifying gaze is taken on by those being objectified. When I ask Nadri about this afterwards, he explains that, in this case, the peasants' resentment was reserved for the coloniser. In a wider sense, though, it is worth wondering whether the instrumentalisation of organic resources is both a means of separating humans and 'nature', but also a consequence of it too. We might wonder, for example, whether it was the British people's separation from our own land, through years of intensive agricultural domestication, deforestation, the resultant absence of predators and the psychologies of feudalism, which resulted in the absence of robust ethical frameworks around relationships to earth others, which meant we could arrive in India and assert ourselves over land and people at such scale and with such lasting impact.

Indigo is now designated as 'invasive' in many regions of the world. It is, therefore, a plant whose history includes being abducted, trafficked, exploited over a more than a century and then, once it has ceased to be useful to trade economies (its natural dye being replaced by a synthetic one), it is branded with the label of 'invader'. As Rebecca McMackinn – Arboretum Curator at Woodlawn Cemetery, New York, and a panelist at the recent *Thinking with Plants and Fungi Conference* (2025) – reminds us, the United Nations describes plants such as indigo as 'aliens' (McMackinn 2025: n.pag.), which, she says, is language that might almost be considered comical if it wasn't the very same language being used to justify family separation and unlawful rendition as we speak. Indeed, the migratory histories of plants are deeply intertwined with colonial histories, and the language used within environmental discourse, as well as certain gardening practices, risks sliding towards a kind of eco-nativism or nationalism that seeks to malign plants simply for surviving (one thinks immediately of the same types of language being used to describe those people who survive perilous boat crossings).

Extractive colonial trade practices such as those foisted upon indigo sit inside the entangled discourses of human and nonhuman geographies, both wrought by anthropocentric and instrumentalist cultures. These are the same relationships described by Val Plumwood (2001: 14) as hegemonic, which she defines as ones whereby 'the dominant party can afford to "forget" the other, provided they continue to function in serviceable ways'. This appears to apply perfectly to those labourers, peasants, cultivators, forests, animals and plants who were seen as docile, meek and 'of service' by colonisers. In a broad sense, then, Plumwood sees that the realm called 'nature' has been devalued, objectified and, ultimately, rendered passive (despite, in indigo's case, consistently producing large amounts of material and financial wealth for humans), by the kind of practices we hear of at this trial. It is through this insight that Plumwood would go on to make the call for the human to focus on the specificity and vitality of the nonhuman; to listen to their stories.

Rachel Pimm is acting as steward for the indigo plant in the centre of the room. Pimm is an artist, filmmaker and decolonial botanist interested in the processes of making – often visiting the material sites of origin of those with whom they are working in order to investigate the enmeshed histories and politics of those collaborators. When we talk on the phone after the trial, one of the first things they tell me is of their ambivalence around the performativity of legal structures. At the same time the *CICC* is being performed, Pimm is awaiting their own trial for alleged involvement in direct action at Filton, the Bristol site of a weapons facility belonging to Israel's largest arms manufacturer Elbit Systems Ltd. This factory has, in the last two years, seen numerous actions by anti-genocide protestors linked to the activist group Palestine Action who have allegedly sought to delay shipments and disable weapons. The most high-profile of these Elbit actions is the case of The Filton 18 – a group of protestors arrested (some at gunpoint) by counter-terrorism police in August 2024 with the charge of attempting to disable weapons inside the facility. The UK government has since made the decision to proscribe Palestine Action under the Terrorism Act 2000. Section 12 of this act has made any display of support for Palestine Action a criminal offence, even making paragraphs such as this one both challenging and somewhat risky for editors or publications to include. At the time of the arrest of the Filton 18, a Palestine Action statement (which has now been made inaccessible, therefore I shall link instead to an enlightening *Bristol Cable* story titled 'Murder Factory') described the purpose of the action of the Filton 18 as being to disable weapons including the drones widely reported to be used in Gaza that mimic the sounds of children crying, thereby drawing civilians out of their houses where they are subsequently executed (Hussaini 2024: n.pag.). Pimm's involvement in both the Court for Intergenerational Climate Crimes and a trial for direct, anti-genocide action is a reminder, then, that practices of omnicide are still being wrought today – as they were by the colonisers working with and for the East India Company. Now though, it is through newly cruel and perverse means. Also striking to me, and just as relevant to this trial, is the broad and aggressive use of British law and its enforcers to shut down, intimidate and suppress civil action against the facilitation of an ongoing and unrelenting genocide. As Huw Lemmey (2025: n.pag.) writes in the *London Review of Books*, this is a 'devastating attack on freedom of conscience'.

Pimm's role as steward is undoubtedly informed by their politics and relational philosophies. And their work with indigo offered me the opportunity to ask them about the ways in which we facilitate plant others in our spaces. I was interested in what processes we are calling upon when convening as humans and nonhumans. In particular, I was interested in Pimm's processes for sourcing the plant that would live in the basement exhibition for three weeks – something that would not only require a specific expertise, but also a high degree of resources and care. I was interested in who this plant was, where it had been, where it was going, how it would be sustained in the dark, as well as insights into the ways in which we might share

space with it, and it with us.

Pimm is involved in community gardening and has an established network of fellow growers who work with plants in multiple forms. They already knew several people who had been sharing their processes of growing and caring for indigo, thus thought it might be easy enough to find a person within that network to source an indigo plant – someone already growing it, perhaps with a plot in the UK, whose plant might be both suitable for borrowing and whose situation would be appropriate for that. The brief was tight, though: a single plant, tall at over 1.2 metres and mature. Most importantly, it needed to be a plant that would survive the trauma of transfer to a dark room and living under a grow lamp for three weeks. This narrowed the selection down to a plant of 'seven plus years', they told me.

Pimm works mostly inside a gift economy, which, by definition, is non-transactional. It is an economy built on relationships and reciprocity, so asking those community gardeners, whose relationships to the plants under their care was often emotional and/or spiritual, was a challenge: 'It felt like, you know, how do you pay for the thing?', Pimm says. 'There isn't really a monetary value to this, and that would enter me into a different kind of reciprocity. When you're the grower, it is a huge sacrifice and a huge trust exercise'. Ideally this would have been a process that began years ago, they say, with a day spent in the company of another grower; a food swap or a story told; the gift of knowledge or company and a seed given as a gesture of relationship. The seed would carry with it the memory of a day or those stories and, in doing so, continue a web of relationships between plants and people. However, for now, this was not going to be possible.

The plant that does sit at the centre of the trial was brought from a nursery in Kent, right on the border of London. It is probably around 15 to 20 years old and came with a good deal of advice on how to care for it from commercial growers who worked with installing plants in spaces where they are unlikely to thrive: 'So although that meant that I didn't have the opportunity to find a specimen that had a very clear and obvious story that I could track, it did feel truer to what was being asked of me in this instance, which was to find a plant that could survive underground in a dark environment which is not at all an appropriate place to be – and that was [achieved] through this capitalist growing structure. Basically, I bought into the other part of the story, which is that you can't always trace things' – and this, of course, doesn't mean you can't still care for them.

In a break between testimonies, I make my way to the indigo plant. This is not actually *indigofera tinctoria*, Pimm told me, but another variety which has been through a process of selective propagation in order to enhance its appeal as 'an ornamental'. Over a few generations of this process, it lost its potential to produce dye. It is also late to leaf. When Pimm delivered it here in the days prior to the opening, they worried that some people might mistake it for a dead plant. 'I found that quite poetic', they say, 'just because there's an event on in April does not mean the plant needs to perform a certain way for us. If you've ever done events like Chelsea [Flower Show], you know how much people are forcing these plants to be a certain way at the exact moment of the show'. This indigo stands on its mound in the basement, lit by a grow lamp timed to mimic daylight hours. It is visited three times a week, watered and, occasionally, it is sung to or sat with.

I had been told the plant had also been joined by a snail, a spider and a fly, and I search the soil for any sign of them. As I lean in, it scratches my cheek with its branch, and I take my hand and hold the plant between my fingers. Initially, it feels strange to be touching it, which I put down to my art gallery conditioning, according to which the viewer and the viewed must be separate (insurance premiums do not look kindly on

the act of touch). Under the grow lamp, the indigo has been propagating its seed. At the opening of the court, the noise of the popping seedpods could be heard alongside human voices, and the yellow carpet is now covered in small back dots – the indigo seed pods. I stand up in the middle of this stage and feel what it's like in the centre of this room – to stand here is, I realise, to stand beside indigo.

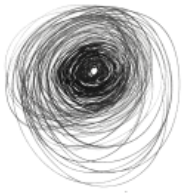
There was a very specific, quite fascinating action that I observed in almost all the human speakers at this trial and its subsequent workshops. It happened inside the triangular stage, designed such that indigo takes up the part of the floor-space where the speaker would most obviously stand. Because of this, the human on the stage spends a significant amount of time obscured to much of the audience by the plant. Of course, the speakers would become aware of this, and, by way of remediation, would deliver their presentation while walking in a circle around the indigo. I will come to think of this action as a kind of incantation; certainly a fascinating thing to watch. It was almost as if each speaker was forced into a performative – both symbolic and literal – relationship to the plant. Inside shared space, the human entered a dynamic whereby they were working both with and around the plant. I watch this as a performance in itself; one that was depicting the ways in which indigo is obstructing the human in this space, forcing the human to navigate it, forcing itself into our line of sight, refusing to be ignored. We are, in many ways, gathered to honour the histories of this plant as a witness to its own stories. This plant between us is an ancestor of the legacies of our histories and action, here via the structures of capitalist growing enterprise, and now being spoken about in the room where we have gathered. The circling, then, alongside our words, means our bodies are in conversation too.

One of my favourite performances of this circling at the *CICC* came from the Dutch-Panamanian artist Antonio Jose Guzman, in collaboration with Iva Jankovic, a Dutch-Yugoslav artist. As part of the *CICC School* which continued to inhabit the space following two days of court proceedings, the duo presented a sonic and textile lecture based on their practices of multi-modal textile engagement and social justice arts (Jankovic could not attend because she was present at the Serbian anti-corruption protests at the time). The duo offered interesting insight into the ways in which human and nonhuman relationships might be revitalised, via their work with indigo at Sufiyan Khatri's workshop in Gujarat, India – a hub of production, dying and fabric design, with a particular specialism in indigo. In their lecture *Dub Indigo Resistances*, the artists used soundscape, video and textile performance that centred trans-border, migratory and social resistance histories, interwoven with the history of their plant collaborator. Guzman and Jankovic's presentation drew out the extraordinary vibrancy within the plant, and their creations highlighted the vitality of labour cultures (as opposed to those more frequent depictions of passive, inert workforces often put forward by capitalist exploiters) which, over centuries, have influenced cultural histories – specifically in this case, music histories.

Guzman stands on stage, obscured to most of us by the indigo plant in front of him and lit from behind by

video projections. He is presenting a multitude of stories that are woven into and out of the confluence of plant and human. His presentation is part poem, part documentary, part historical time warp where dub-infused rhythms seep into text and into textile. The writing is reminiscent of an evangelical sermon, with phrasal repetition performed in a vibrational bath of enormous amounts of reverb. This creates a kind of ceremonial atmosphere that feels like an honouring of indigo and the cultures it has woven. We hear the refrains *indigo rising*, *indigo speak the truth*, and *indigo drum of the fabrica*. It's a vibrant portrait of plant as entangled in resistance, and as resister in its own right. For me, the most striking image to come out of the performance is that of the blue-stained hands of an indigo processor shown in projection on screen – plant and human engaged in mutual (and striking) metamorphosis.

These textile testimonies are delivered as fragments of a story, and these fragments speak to loss, to discontinuity and interruption. They are fragments obscured. The performance seems to be reaching across temporal and literal geographies, as when turning the dial of a longwave radio we land for a moment in some historical clarity, only to continue on to a new time, a new context, a new political history. Any sense of the linear is both abandoned here and also not the point: we are in plant time. As members of this indigo congregation (indigo trance?), we are enveloped by sound, video, reverb, strobe lights, voice, story and plant. We are washed with indigo's vitality as it arrives in waves, never staying long enough to sit with, and disappearing into the next iteration. We hear another refrain: *fantasma della storia* – the ghost of history. The screen shows clips of resistance and rebellion, of the 1981 Toxteth riots in Liverpool, of club cultures formed out of oppression or racial violence; of those bleeding blue (*not royal blood, indigo blue*). We watch hands that wrap these textiles and listen as they speak their memories; blue-dyed fabric tangled around bodies, on heads, in hair, then other bodies wrap around each other on a dance floor. Indigo, Guzman tells us, is a collaborator who can speak across time, across species and borders – and it has a lot to say.



In the workshop *Unsensed: More than Human Rights*, held a few days after Guzman and Jankovic's lecture performance, Lucy Sollitt, Creative Director of FutureEverything, and CREAM Co-Director Neal White cover a number of the challenges of voicing with and listening to 'earth others'. Sollitt asks us to reconsider (remember?) the role that this realm called 'nature' plays within our own anthropocentric structures, positing that when the vitality of the nonhuman is brought inside our supposedly human worlds, we can find richer, deeper and more equitable relationships. There have, by now, been numerous ventures seeking to redress the working relationship of humans and nonhumans, ones that look to bring others into human endeavours including artistic, literary or – in the case of indigo – mercantile pursuits. This is increasingly being done with a focus on ethics of care, anti-hegemonic practices and, in the case of academia, a newer attention on concepts such as 'ethos' (van Dooren and Rose 2016: 80). In a 2016 essay describing the discipline of Multi-Species Studies, van Dooren, Münster and Kirksey (2016: 1) set out their vision for a different kind of 'attentiveness'. Their call is for researchers to direct their attention both out towards those whom researchers write about, and inwards, towards the human engaged in the act of

researching. Within the same journal issue there also is a call for an ethography based on an 'ecological animism' (van Dooren and Rose 2016: 82), again making use of this notion of 'ethos'. For the authors, ethos is that which 'makes a group or kind distinctive' (van Dooren and Rose 2016: 80). It is, in some ways, a broader, more inclusive reading of 'culture', but also differentiated from traditional ethographic scholarship through the idea that ethos is not something exceptional to the human sphere (van Dooren and Rose 2016: 79). Like Plumwood, these authors reject a dualistic world, preferring instead to develop Clifford Geertz's idea that the human is 'an animal suspended in webs of significance he [sic] himself has spun' (quoted in van Dooren and Rose 2016: 85). This time, however, they are clear that 'humans are not the only beings suspended in such a way and that no one – no group or species – ever spins alone' (van Dooren and Rose 2016: 85). How, then, should we approach a project of attentiveness to earth others, particularly when so often our stories are told in a language specific to humans? And, as that is the case, how can we avoid artistic endeavours that simply become a project of silencing, via such processes as speaking 'on behalf of others' (Spivak 1988). Contemporary environmental art and literature might currently be seeking to 'give voice to the voiceless', however, this comes with the risk of speaking over or without our collaborators. Projects such as these are at risk of becoming yet another means of centring the human.

One question that I am continually fascinated by, and which I believe sits right in the centre of these ethical and methodological dilemmas, is offered by the queer poet and scholar Alyson Hallett. In speaking at the *art.earth* symposium of June 2022, Hallett – whose doctoral research explores 'geographical intimacy' (Hallett 2016) – spoke about her book, *Stone Talks* (2019), in which she relates the time she held a pebble in her hand and heard the pebble speak. In retelling this story, she asked the audience to consider the idea that, if a thought comes into your mind when you are holding a stone, is it ever possible to know whether that idea would have come to mind were you not holding that stone? This question, as I understand it, sits at an interesting intersection, between Plumwood's Philosophical Animism and Donna Haraway's (2016: 97) concept of situated knowledges, which is based on the acknowledgement that knowledge comes from somewhere, is subjective and articulated through a body. Tantalisingly, Hallett seems to be asking: what if we were to expand this sense of situating ourselves and the knowledge we describe to include the knowledges of those with whom we are doing that describing?

Throughout her workshop, Sollitt is extremely conscious of current environmental ethics debates and is keen to elevate Indigenous knowledges in her work and, indeed, in her presentation of it. She is joined here by her collaborator, Keith Williams, whose paternal heritage includes ancestors from Tyendinaga – a Mohawk community on Lake Ontario – and whose own work is interested in methods of both expression and understanding within interspecies communications. In his presentation, Williams cites a number of sensuous human technologies including 'feeling, emotions, mental impressions, thoughts, touch, smell and intuition' as being tools we can use for reciprocal communication. For him, Williams says, this kind of 'somatic attunement' is part of numerous Indigenous relationships to land, whereas Enlightenment thinking has, instead, heavily favoured sight and sound. The simplicity of Williams' statement, and the simplicity of the tools he describes as being part of Mohawk practices, is fascinating to me if only because it speaks to a kind of bodily trust which can so often be missing from Eurocentric practices of knowledge production. Listening to Williams, I can recognise quite clearly that I am part of a culture which does not trust its body, or, perhaps, even actively distrusts it. It might even be possible to say that I am part of a culture that has taught me to ignore my body as much as I can. Indeed, I believe some of this distrust I recognise in myself can be heard in Hallett's question, too. Reframed slightly, Hallett might also be asking: how can we *trust* that a

thought might have arrived to us from a stone? Both Sollitt and Williams are, though, keen to emphasise not-knowing, and not-solving, choosing instead to focus on the act of involving; to being led; to relating; and to centring thinkers, artists and practitioners who are part of the cultures where these sensuous technologies (and, importantly, the trust in their skills to use them) already exist.

Sollitt's project is an interesting one because it explores interspecies collaboration via the inclusion of 'nature' on a corporate board – specifically, the board of the community interest company FutureEverything. Sollitt's personal work is focused on 'the synthetic sacred', a concept which opposes the boundaried binaries of natural and unnatural, seeking instead to embrace the convergence of the synthetic materials and bodies emerging in the Anthropocene, as being just as lively as those considered 'organic'. Nature in FutureEverything's context is described as 'a broad web of life' rather than a singular entity, and the aim for their corporate experiment is not to know – not to become masters of, or speakers for – but to 'attune' as a practice in itself; one of awareness towards broader ways of experiencing. It seems to me that this is done not with the intention of seeking out anything in particular, but with a productive openness, and this is a perspective shared by many post-humanists or new materialists, for whom relationality is central: the relationship is the point. When the intention is not aimed at a specific outcome, or at achieving a defined role that 'nature' plays in their work, the nonhuman might become an active part of the decision-making process for the organisation. And this approach has the potential to form and transform their collective culture, their processes and, of course, the wider impact of their work.

White and Sollitt's workshop culminated in a guided meditation delivered via a pre-recorded video by the Chilean artist Patricia Dominguez of Studio Vegetalista, whose practice 'combines art, ethnobotany, and healing cosmologies' (Dominguez 2025: n.pag.). Although we were encouraged to close our eyes at the beginning of the meditation, this was an audio and visual presentation (I admit I chose to watch the video instead) that took the form of a practice of honouring. In this case, what we were honouring was planetary memory. Dominguez drew us deep into ourselves and deep into the world, taking our attention not only to that which we saw and heard at that moment, but perhaps to what we hear across time. The visuals – neon greens, deep reds and purples – sat well within the parameters of Sollitt's 'synthetic sacred' and sought to draw together the wide variety of experiencing that is available on this plane with both deep reverence for organic ecologies as well as those more inorganic. As Sollitt (2015: n.pag.) writes, '[t]he sacred can provide a framework for how to let nature guide the development of hybrid ecologies – even the most highly synthetic'.

At the end of the *CICC* trial, I sit in my seat in Ambika P3 and watch as the Public Jury, Prosecutors, Witnesses and Judges pick up their belongings and gather to talk. Many of them collect on the yellow stage, by the indigo. I sit inside this moment with my focus lightly on the centre of the room, and I do what I'd found myself doing a lot while I was there: I start circling. My circling happens on the page, however, with

paper and pen. In my case, this circling is a kind of cartography: a means to mimic the motions I have been witnessing in the middle. I had not been doing this intentionally, though. While I listened to the trial and its speakers, my hand seemed to reach to the page without my conscious knowledge. Later, I will wonder if my focus on the circling represents a somewhat anthropocentric, perhaps even pacifying perspective of indigo to have taken, as I wonder whether I'm ignoring the plant by focusing on the motion of the people. But it's not until a week or so afterwards, when I am walking along a beach with a friend that I am able to make some sense of it. As we talk, my friend picks up a chalk pebble with a hole in it and I tell them that this is called a Hagstone or witch's pebble, and the folk understanding is that if you look through the hole you see through a veil to the other side: to the spirit realm. It's a well-storied stone, I say, people sometimes wear them around their neck for protection.

The hole in the Hagstone is, according to many, formed by erosion from the sea. There is, however, also a line of thinking that suggests that the hole came first, the pebble second. In this explanation, an animal initially occupied that space in death on the sea floor. After their body has decomposed, that space is only partially filled by sediment. This gives rise to a hole around which stone matter accumulates. What I come to appreciate when my friend picks up this stone is that the emptinesses at the centre of my circling sketches are not empty spaces at all, not anything close to empty. Rather, they are the centre around which to build. In the Hagstone, you can choose to see a hole or you can choose to see the space as something in its own right; something that has a rock around it. I can see these as sketches of indigo, or indigo's impact. They are lines that speak to the plant's presence in the room; the very effect it is having on our gathering. And they are also the lines of listening and a tool to listen with. As I watch the trial and attend the subsequent workshops, I hold my pen to the page in the same way I might turn an ear towards another person. These lines are both the method for, and the evidence of, indigo holding my attention.

I touch the new indigo shoots that have sprouted since we've been here, holding them between my finger and thumb, then I sit back in a chair to watch as people gather on the stage. This indigo will go into the care of a friend of Rachel Pimm, an artist they have been in dialogue with for some time. The two collaborate around anti-colonial botany practices, spending time together on each other's projects and on residencies. They've been cooking together, talking about ingredients together and visiting gardens together. For Pimm, it felt important that the future steward of the indigo plant was someone they remain connected to in some way. So after the workshops, it will be taken to its new home in Northeast London where the two friends will plant it together.

I watch from my seat as someone stands facing the indigo while stroking their fingers through their beard. Another collects a seed pod from the ground, then a second. One person removes their glasses to take photos of green shoots hanging in air. A person circles around the Indigo, hands clasped, stopping once they arrive back where they had begun. Another poses for a photo, their back to the Indigo. Two people together now inspecting pods. A person approaches another with a napkin, they open it and place their seeds inside. Bend down, brush hair, knock more seeds to the floor. A child rummages through the soil with their fingernails and stops, a smile, they look at the plant from top to bottom. A mouth wide open. A photo in front then a photo standing behind. The child returns, pinging a branch with their finger, waiting for the adult to finish a conversation. A hand reaches into the centre, by the roots, pokes at the base and three shoots show themselves under the earth. A new branch pokes a person in the back, they all turn around to see who is behind them. Someone kneels to pick up a seed, then hands the seed to someone else. By the time I leave, the basement is largely empty, now holding only a small gathering of humans around a plant.

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