

Performance and Body in Post-Colonial Society

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Filipino-American author Sarita See's *The Decolonized Eye* delves into the phenomenon of colonial loss, namely the loss of shared native language, autonomy, and safety. See finds that, especially in the Philippines, indigenous people lost their ability to communicate. The predominant language became synonymous with colonial violence, thus verbal expression evolved into a new kind of trauma in which "attempts at expressing pain reinscribed the power of the colonizer."¹ The rage and grief of the colonized creates a "self-destructive impulse" fed by inferiority.² To regain power, See argues that the ultimate expression of self lies in the body as a form of protest against colonizers who seek ownership.

See's discussion of self-inflicted harm as a post-colonial protest prompted a response from the scholarly community. Historian Ernest Hunter writes about ritual self-mutilation in Australia among the Aboriginal population. Following the colonization of Australia, Aboriginal males were denied their traditional authority by Europeans. This sentiment is echoed as he writes: "When the dominating matrix of society is male dominated, the men of the dominated society will be emasculated."³ Thus, in Australia, Aboriginal men faced an imposed inferiority not only in their cultural origins, but also in their masculinity. Hunter found increased rates of self-mutilation among men, attributing it to the "deeper scars etched into the very existence of self as Aborigines."⁴ The lasting impact of systematic oppression links modern bodies with their colonial ancestry. The shared physical pain across generations allows these modern bodies to feel connected with the pain inflicted during colonization. Overall, Hunter further exemplifies how self-harm can be used as a display of anger and protest.

¹ Sarita See, *The Decolonized Eye: Filipino American Art and Performance*. U of Minnesota Press, 2009, 8.

² See, 8.

³ Ernest Hunter, "A Question of Power: Contemporary Self-Mutilation among Aborigines in the Kimberley," *The Australian Journal of Social Issues*; Sydney 25, no. 4 (November 1, 1990), 274.

⁴ Hunter, 274.

Filipino author Kella de Castro Svetich expands upon See's notion of deriving power from the body and Hunter's exploration of self-mutilation. Svetich claims that the body holds "the function and burden of cultural memory" rather than language.⁵ He considers the body a superior mode of communication, not only due to the erasure of native language, as See referenced, but also because language cannot "adequately testify and witness" the trauma of colonialism.⁶ Unlike the body, language does not hold the capacity to feel physical pain. The sense of powerlessness that accompanies psychological inferiority following colonization is wiped away when one's own agency is used to inflict pain. By self-inflicting wounds, namely through ritual crucifixion, Svetich argues that Filipinos subvert the historical role of the Spanish and Americans. Instead, they partake in "performative martyrdom," or sacrifice, to disrupt the authority of the colonizer by exercising intentional bodily control.⁷ Svetich's view aligns with both Hunter and See's description of bodily harm as meaningful protest.

The use of body as a form of expression is not limited to the sensation of physical pain. Ameet Parameswaran describes the tension bodies feel when torn between colonial history and indigenous culture, specifically in post-colonial India. Parameswaran says that a "cultural amnesia" develops when "the colonizer is 'human' and the native is marked by territory."⁸ Rather than being true native bodies, Parameswaran calls the colonized, and their descendants, "nativized bodies."⁹ These individuals constantly search for an "authentic Indian-ness," diluted by colonialism, which may never be found.¹⁰ This desire sparked a movement in India known as

⁵ Kella de Castro Svetich, "Flesh and Blood: Colonial Trauma and Abjection in Contemporary Filipino American Fiction," Ph.D., University of California, Davis, 2005, 41

⁶ Svetich, 40.

⁷ Svetich, 56.

⁸ Ameet Parameswaran, "Playing Nativized Bodies: Performative Body as Disjuncture In the Indian Liberalization Regime.," Ph.D., University of California, Los Angeles, 2012, 2.

⁹ Parameswaran, 1

¹⁰ Parameswaran, 6.

the Theater of Roots in the 1960s to counteract westernization. Indian theater's use of the body allowed for the embodiment of culture. He argues that during colonialism "the body [became] the slave of mind."¹¹ In post-colonial Indian performances, "dancing is thus a deliberate act" to take advantage of the independence not afforded to the colonial ancestry.¹² Parameswaran, like See, regards the body as an important symbol of freedom; however, Parameswaran qualifies this view. He references not bodily harm, but culturally linked performances such as dance and theater with one's salvation.

In viewing the body's capacity for performance, art, and creativity, Kristy Ganoe's dissertation "Mindful Movement as a Cure for Colonialism," focuses on the use of aikido, a Japanese martial art, as bodily empowerment.¹³ In a post-colonial society, Ganoe argues that the colonized have an unhealthy history with violence, such as the power imbalance that See attributes to the bodies of the colonized. Ganoe offers aikido as an alternate form of performance which "transforms violence" and "reprograms participant's understanding of power."¹⁴ Ganoe claims that the body is a vessel of love, thus the performance of aikido promotes a positivity that "undermines the logic of colonialism."¹⁵ Using one's body not to dominate the opponent but to exercise strength and controlled movement illuminates the difference between strength and violence. The discovery of bodily control has the potential to increase the self-esteem of previously devalued bodies, while circumventing aggression. Ganoe's focus on the body's artistic form aligns with Parameswaran's thoughts on liberation through performance art.

¹¹ Parameswaran, 69.

¹² Parameswaran, 69.

¹³ Kristy Ganoe, "Mindful Movement as a Cure for Colonialism," Ph.D., Bowling Green State University, 2013, 18

¹⁴ Ganoe, 20.

¹⁵ Ganoe, 19.

While the body can be a linking factor for communities to accumulate culture and power, it can also be a tool of mourning. See touched on the Freudian notion of melancholia, the loss of an object without the capability to name what has been lost, in relation to colonial trauma. In the venture to cope with the subsequent oppression and loss, Kristina Hagstrom discusses the use of body to deal with melancholy through performance art. Hagstrom views the “work of mourning” synonymously to a “work of art.”¹⁶ Melancholia as a form of art allows loss to become a creative outlet. If one is unsure of what has been lost, a “rewriting of the past as well as the reimagining of the future” may occur.¹⁷ The artist is no longer constrained by traumatic events of the past. Instead, they become a storyteller with the power to override colonial trauma and resolve grief. Hagstrom reiterates the use of performance art found in the writings of Gaoe and Parameswaran; however, she contextualizes it as a replacement for lost language, a sentiment shared by See.

Although many academics have discussed the role that one’s body plays in the empowerment of self in post-colonial life, author Godson Jacob uses his experience as a queer man to define exactly what makes the body “the source of oppression and marginalization” for the colonized.¹⁸ The body is the visible manifestation of self. Thus, when society uses the tools of sex/gender and language to oppress individuals, one becomes enchained by thoughts “instituted and inscribed on the surface of bodies.”¹⁹ The only way to truly embody one’s self is through physicality, the sole medium free from social construction. Marginalized communities must use the body as a means of interaction to evade influence from the dominant group. Godson

¹⁶ Kristina Hagstrom, “Melancholy Traces: Performing the Work of Mourning,” Ph.D., University of California, Berkeley, 2006, 1

¹⁷ Hagstrom, 24.

¹⁸ Godson Jacob, “Body as Performative Text: A Postcolonial/Decolonial Re-Imagination of Queer Body/ies,” Ph.D., Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago, 2019, 44

¹⁹ Jacob, 116.

writes: “Only a body in pain could understand other bodies in pain.”²⁰ Thus, the body becomes a non-verbal form of communication among the oppressed. In the absence of language, Godson relies on the body to convey expression, just as See posited.

See’s arguments on the Filipino experience with colonization and post-colonial melancholy began a conversation on the many ways colonized individuals have used performance and bodily expression internationally. The common thread which each of these selected authors touch on is the attempt by post-colonial communities to regain power. See’s work, and the subsequent contemporary discourse, highlights the potential post-colonial communities hold to overcome trauma using their own agency. Imperial violence generated anger and grief which can only be mediated by one’s own body, the sole thing that guarantees humanity.

²⁰ Jacob, 4.

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