

*The Decolonized Eye: Filipino American Art and Performance.* Sarita Echavez See, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009. ISBN: 9780816653195

In the growing body of scholarship on Filipino American cultural productions, a few names continually appear, their literatures rightfully celebrated both for their form and for the ways they illuminate the socioeconomic conditions facing Filipinos in the homeland and in the continental US and Hawai'i since the 1899 Philippine-American War: Carlos Bulosan and Bienvenido Santos's novels and essays on the *pensionados* and migrant farmworkers; the experimental poetry of Jose Garcia Villa; and the postcolonial, postmodern works of Jessica Hagedorn, to name a few. Departing from Filipino American Studies' heavy emphasis on literary analysis, Sarita Echavez See's *The Decolonized Eye* turns to the visual and performative to understand how Filipino American artists "respond to a matrix of historical, psychic and cultural dispossession by producing a visual and rhetorical grammar of violence that in turn 'disarticulates' the empire" (xviii). Beginning with the assertion that the Filipino subject is "foreign in a domestic sense" in relation to the United States—or is literally and figuratively positioned inside and outside of the geopolitical borders of the United States—See's text offers a groundbreaking analysis of the multifaceted and innovative means through which contemporary Filipino American artists reverse dominant American discourses of immigrant assimilation and of America's inherent benevolence and racial democracy.

Though trained as a scholar of English and Comparative Literature, See is interested in investigating a different kind of Filipino American "grammar" than that offered by the printed text. Following Hortense Spillers, See illuminates "ruptures" to American imperial amnesia, locating the emergence of "a radically different kind of cultural consciousness" in Filipino American visual cultural productions and performance.<sup>1</sup> *The Decolonized Eye* follows the work of six under-studied Filipino American artists—filmmaker Angel Velasco Shaw, painter Manuel Ocampo, visual artists Paul Pfeiffer and Reanne Estrada, performance artist Nicky Paraiso, and comedian Rex Navarrete—to illustrate how Filipino American visual and performative aesthetics offer a critique of imperial historiography's rational and linear logics by deploying modes of mimicry, humor, and abstraction that escape capture by the textual archive. The artists she profiles *do not* use the master's tools of the literary and written text to dismantle the master's house; instead, through their music, films, and campy comedic routines, they produce alternative anti-colonial grammars that challenge dominant forms of knowledge production and institutional power on other terms. By being able "to record *and yet not record* experience," to reveal and to abstract the Filipino American postcolonial condition and history as necessary, these artists fashion both an ethics and aesthetics of resistance (xiv). Their creative labor helps us imagine everyday modes of surviving in a settler colonial state that denies its role in the genocide and impoverishment of people of color, migrants, and indigenous peoples.

Theoretically and methodologically, See's project is innovative for its incorporation of multiple interdisciplinary frameworks including museum studies, performance studies, Filipino psychology, psychoanalysis, feminist and queer theory, and

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<sup>1</sup> Hortense J. Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," *Diacritics* 17 (Summer 1987): 65-81, 68.

critical race studies. Significantly, See's close readings show how Filipino American visual cultural productions and performances not only subvert imperialist discourses about the native Filipino, but also reveal the limits of the dominant Western theoretical paradigms used to analyze cultural productions themselves. In her reading of Manuel Ocampo's painting "Heridas de la Lengua" in the first chapter, See refuses the Freudian castration model as the primary mode of understanding the piece, which depicts a beheaded male figure, seated and gripping a bloody knife. She transforms Freud's pathological reading of melancholia into a generative post/colonial melancholia, to read in "Heridas" a representation of morbid self-mockery that produces a collective political possibility for Filipino Americans. Ocampo's portraits "offer themselves as jokes, objects of ridicule that provoke the formation of communal bonds of laughter" (21). In doing so, See complicates an understanding of melancholy as an individualized pathology, to show how melancholia as collective grievance can be made a vehicle for critiquing empire.

The power of the pun, the joke, and the laugh as a form of anticolonial critique emerges again in Rex Navarrete's performances, the subject of chapter three in the second half of the book. Here, See performs a complex reading of several of the popular comedian's routines, for the ways he draws upon, twists, and inverts a "vocabulary and archive of experiences [that] have accrued over time," a grammar that is shared with the Filipino American audiences who respond to his punny/funny jokes and stories with gusto (79). While the discussion of mimicry and humor as a tool to slyly critique the colonial educational system is not new, See expands her analysis to make a theoretical intervention into Asian American and Philippine Studies, by discussing the impact of Navarrete's work on Filipino American audiences who, in sharing the joke, forge an affective, collective community. Navarrete's sketch, "Mrs. Scott's ESL Class," comments on the continuing "miseducation of the Filipino" through the American educational system that scholars have identified as a central project of the US's "benevolent assimilation" of the Philippines. The classroom depicted here, however, is not in the colonial Philippines but in 1980s California; Mrs. Scott is not a white American schoolteacher, but a Filipina from Guam, invested in correcting the "imperfect" English of Filipino migrant students like the young Navarrete in order to help them assimilate into dominant US society. Playing on the common mistake of confusing "p" and "f" sounds made by native Filipino speakers when speaking English, we are made to both laugh *at* and *with* Mrs. Scott's poor grammar; through our laughter, we as Filipino American audiences perform a (dis)identification with our condition of "colonial mentality" and the our assimilationist drives. See's reading here presents a challenge to Asian American Studies, whose discussion of immigrant assimilation is often disconnected from colonial assimilation, and to Philippine Studies, whose accounting for Filipino postcolonial subjectivity does not often include Filipinos who have migrated to the belly of the beast. As she argues, creative expressions like Navarrete's put pressure on the very concept of geographical boundaries, highlighting the book's primary claim, that Filipinos in America, as a result of American conquest of the Philippines, are still "foreign in a domestic sense" (103).

This liminal positioning of Filipinos in the United States, as neither interior nor exterior to the American national body, is perhaps best explicated in See's fourth chapter, on *House/Boy*, a play by gay second-generation Filipino American writer and performer Nicky Paraiso. In a way that calls to mind the work of both José Muñoz and Fred Moten

in its attention to the performing body and the grain of the voice, See uses Paraiso's performance to ruminate on the ways that the nation both (re)produces and polices the racialized, sexualized subject as a means of drawing national boundaries and of consolidating national identity as white, heteronormative, and citizen. In *House/Boy*, the protagonist's affective and productive labor as his mother's caretaker and his father's occupational labor as a domestic worker is a commentary on the emasculation of Filipino/American men under imperialism. However, See goes on to elaborate, Paraiso's play also exceeds this melancholic narrative. In the campiness of Paraiso's performance and in the tonal quality of his voice when singing *The King and I*'s "Something Wonderful" at the play's conclusion, Paraiso produces "an alternative or queer kind of closure, a scattering that intensifies rather than diminishes the possibilities of belonging... [and] radically transforms the concepts of the imperial home and the colonized houseboy" (125). See's analysis of *House/Boy* here is generative for its opening up of the grammar of the political to account for contingency and ephemerality as viable alternatives to organizational politics that often leave no room for the gay or non-heteronormative Filipino subject to participate in anti-colonial action or affect. It is an important reminder of other forms of resistance possible at a time during which the reach and depth of US surveillance culture and the persistence of warfare and empire seem insurmountable.

Although there are only two female artists—Angel Shaw and Reanne Estrada—discussed in *The Decolonized Eye*, the entirety of the book stages a necessary queer and feminist-of-color critique of both Filipino and Filipino American nationalist discourse and Eurocentric theoretical paradigms such as Freudian psychoanalysis. In her readings of these lesser-theorized Filipino American performers and visual artists, See destabilizes our understanding of both pre-established cultural canons *and* our assumptions of stable racial and national identities—making her intellectual and political kin to queer and feminist theorists such as Gloria Anzaldúa and Judith Butler. This text complicates our knowledge of Filipino America—it is not easily contained, geographically or politically, but is rather a community *in becoming*, forged out of the United States' continuing presence in the Philippines but not limited or solely defined through this relation. *The Decolonized Eye* is also incredibly important as one of the few works in Filipino American Studies that takes seriously the form and not only the content of visual cultural and performance pieces. Artists like Estrada, Ocampo, and Pfeiffer give us unruly, undisciplined Filipino figures, or refuse to represent the figure entirely, in their art—their aesthetic choices, See shows us, are grounded in a decolonial ethics even if they do not claim themselves overtly as "political" or community-based artists.

Along with *Puro Arte*, the just-published work by Lucy San Pablo Burns on Filipino American theater and performance, Sarita See's *The Decolonized Eye* is part of a new direction of Filipino American cultural studies that moves beyond a tracing of the histories of the US imperial control of images to consider multiple forms of aesthetic resistance made by Filipino/American artists themselves. It shifts our understanding of Filipino Americans as only or always the melancholy objects of violence and trauma towards a view of us as subjects with an ever-expanding grammar with which we play with, contest, and survive empire.