



Book Review

Migration in Performance: Crossing the Colonial Present

Johnston, Caleb, & Pratt, Geraldine. (2019). Abingdon UK & New York: Routledge. ISBN 9780367138301 (paper) US\$49.95; ISBN 9781138885639 (cloth) US\$150.00; ISBN 9781315715339 (e-book) US\$24.98. 190 pages

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Caleb Johnston and Geraldine Pratt's (2019) *Migration in Performance: Crossing the Colonial Present* is a captivating book that travels alongside "Nanay," a site-responsive theatre production staging archived testimonies of Filipino women involved in Canada's Live-in Caregiver Program (LCP). Through *Nanay*, Johnston, Pratt, and their collaborators seek to challenge the presumed generosity of the LCP program – a program that offers participants the opportunity to apply for permanent residency after 24 months of service – by shedding light on how, in practice, the conditions of the program leave participants vulnerable to exploitation and marginalization. By bringing testimonies accumulated through a research collaboration with the Philippine Women Center (PWC) of British Columbia (BC) to the stage, *Nanay* aims to unsettle an intercultural audience into uncomfortable conversations about Canada's dependency on racialized labour migration to fulfill its social reproduction, the uneven geography of circumstances that propel this movement of peoples, and the generational consequences it has for migrant workers and their families.

From the outset, the play aimed to invite a process of "complex witnessing" (p. 61) through the choice of testimonial genre, intercultural attendance, the intimacy and interactivity of the piece, and through talkback sessions in which audience members could comment and ask questions. This feedback formed a new archive as *Nanay* travelled, which in turn informed subsequent productions, prompting an iterative pattern of research-becoming-creation-becoming-research again. Johnston and Pratt followed *Nanay* (and

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ISSN: 1911-4788



its spin-off performance *Tlingipino Bingo*), as it traveled with its “baggage” across the different yet interconnected geographies of Berlin, Quezon City and Bagong Barrio (two differently positioned migrant sending communities in Metro Manila), and Whitehorse. Unpacking the sometimes-unforeseen contents of this baggage in motion is the project of this indispensable book.

The relational comparison that emerges in Johnston and Pratt’s account of the travels of *Nanay* resonates with what Cindi Katz (2001) terms a “countertopography.” Whereas a topographic approach examines the ways global forces intersect in particular places, and is routinely used as an instrument of capitalist domination, a countertopography appropriates topography as a comparative device, and might instead be used to “work out a situated, but at the same time scale-jumping and geography-crossing, political response to it” (Katz, 2001, p. 1216). As *Nanay* travelled, the authors highlight how the play’s reception shifted in relation to each new location’s place along the global care chain. Johnston and Pratt seize on performers’ and attendees’ situated knowledge to both improve the theatre piece, and to productively unsettle their analysis.

The book’s chapters are organized chronologically around performances, each chapter delving into the challenges and accomplishments that accompanied *Nanay* in a new context, and tracing where the contours of each performance site connect to the global care chain. Chapter One is oriented around the initial creation of the play from 2007 to 2009, where, in a collaborative process with the PWC of British Columbia, the researchers, actors, and director Alex Ferguson, put together the first public performance of *Nanay* for the PuSh International Performing Arts Festival. The chapter also touches on a similar but modified staging of the script in Berlin at the Hebbel am Ufer (HAU) Theatre later that same year. This performance is left relatively under-explored. While these first versions of the play were generally well-received, they faced some criticisms around (a) the use of shadow-puppetry, which has no tradition in the Philippines, (b) for a monologue that was edited in such a way that it cast the speaker as a victim, and (c) for a scene in which the audience is invited to walk through a replica of a domestic worker’s bedroom. Although the bedroom was created in collaboration with the domestic worker in question, one Colombian woman found walking through the room alongside a White audience to be invasive and offensive.

As *Nanay* began to travel the difference and yet connectedness of place began to surface more prominently. The second chapter follows the play to its first performance in the Philippines. After members of PWC of BC expressed the desire to share these stories with their families back home, arrangements were made to take the play to Manila. The play was redesigned for the PETA theatre, and the script was reworked in ways that tried to address critiques of the earlier production. It included new material developed from a talkback session in Vancouver where a Philippine government representative had participated, as well as other interventions in the script that addressed some

concerns raised in earlier performances. In Manila, audience members who had family members in the LCP appreciated insight into their lives in Canada, and others in the middle-class audience used it to think about the care workers employed in their own homes. However *Nanay* also faced important criticisms, particularly around the play's tone and use of English. In the talkback, one audience member commented that they could feel the White audience implied in the play: "They were talking like we didn't know what they were talking about" (p. 86). This comment caused Johnston and Pratt to reflect on the deficiencies of their efforts to transnationalize the piece, as well as on how the use of English in the Philippines is laden with colonial meanings. This, among other criticisms, spurred a deeper engagement with the other ways Western framings were embedded in the play, by laying bare the work that hadn't yet been done to situate the play within contemporary colonialism (p. 89).

What was a problem in the performance ends up being a gift to the reader. Indeed, Johnston and Pratt's openness about their failures is perhaps the best part of the book. In the moments where they engage with their failures, the authors model the kind of "unstable allyship" (p. 163) and responsibility that they hoped to instil in Canadian audience members.

New layers of complexity emerge in the third chapter, co-written with Vanessa Banta, which traces *Nanay*'s return to Metro Manila's Bagong Barrio community in order to address the "sobering" (p. 94) feedback from the PETA production. Migrante International, an alliance of Filipino migrant activist groups, pointed out that the venue had been expensive and inaccessible to many migrant workers. To address the way that Whiteness still "clung to the play," a new team completely reworked the earlier script (p. 95). In this second trip to the Philippines, Johnston, Pratt, Banta and their collaborators – among them the community theatre group Teatro Ekyumenikal along with Migrante International– reinvented *Nanay*. The entire performance was translated into Tagalog, and new migration narratives of overseas Filipino workers in other parts of the world were added. These accounts placed the LCP in the context of a global geography of labor migration, and were put into relief with scenes documenting Bagong Barrio's local history of resistance through union organizing, protest, and strikes during the repressive years, 1972-1981.

The book's last chapter looks at returning from the Philippines with this body of work for two performances in Canada, but this time in the very different context of Whitehorse, Yukon. The first of the two productions happened at the Pivot Theatre Festival in 2015 and received mixed reactions. Filipino response in particular was different than it had been in Vancouver. Attendees resisted the tone of the play by stressing Whitehorse's Filipino community's success: how they have been able to buy cars and houses and to sponsor family members' immigration through savvy use of the Yukon Nominee Program.

An attendee at the first Whitehorse production of play, Sharon Shorty, a Tlingit elder, emerges as one of the most interesting characters of the book. She spoke in the talkback session about the resonances of Filipino overseas workers' experiences of family disruption with Indigenous experiences of Canada's residential schools. From this emerged a collaboration between Shorty and Hazel Venzon, who had been involved in earlier versions of *Nanay*. Together they created *Tlingipino Bingo*, a mostly improvised performance involving joke-telling, stories, bingo, and a drag performance by "Miss Lituya," a character created by Ricky Tagaban who has Tlingit and Filipino origins. Johnston and Pratt show how Shorty – in character as "Gamma Susie" – and Miss Lituya draw out connections between Tlingit and Filipino people, decentre Western conceptions of queer, and put Canadian colonial framings and "rigidities" (Simpson, 2014) in the back seat, all through laughter and trading stories.

Johnston and Pratt argue that it is important to bring shared Indigenous and migrant experiences to light, as "silences about histories of international intimacies, like the history of Filipinos and Tlingit stop us from knowing other ways of relating" which could be tools for imagining the future (p. 143). At the same time, they maintain that settler colonialism and racialized labour migration are fundamentally different phenomena. They warn that their histories, although interwoven in ways that leave them open to solidarity-building, are also prone to reinforcing liberal narratives of a multicultural Canada, which leaves the settler-colonial backbone of the state intact.

Throughout the book Johnston and Pratt grapple with the politics of turning research into performance. These recurring moments of reflexivity are deeply valuable and come across in *Migration in Performance's* tentative language. The authors, to their credit, make no positivist claims, and are quick to question their own project. These practices are important to aligning the authors' methodological approach with the decolonial politics that underlie the book. As White settlers, Johnston and Pratt take an auto-critical posture, and pose the question of whether as allies they might contribute to "shaking the foundations of racial capitalism and dismantling the binaries through which racial violence works" (p. 163). Leaving open the possibility that the answer to this question is "no," they opt to proceed with the often-suggested project of dismantling the coherence of the transparent White subject as a way forward.

Through their open questioning, Johnston and Pratt offer a history of attempts to think through how to respond ethically to the interconnected particularities of the places *Nanay* was privileged to travel. In Vancouver, concerns centred on creating a piece which would provoke a mode of spectatorship that evaded the tendency towards "liberal sentimentality" characteristic of many emotionally intense, but ultimately deresponsibilizing dramatic works (p. 34). Controlling responses to the medium of documentary theatre is a difficult task, and the intention of destabilizing viewers into

taking responsibility touches on long debated questions about the nature and impact of politically charged art. Images and performances are particularly fraught when they lean on the affective heft of portrayals of violence or marginalization (Sontag, 2003). If the intention of a work of art is to inspire feelings of responsibility in an audience, showing extreme hardship is no guarantee of success. Indeed, as Maggie Nelson notes in her “reckoning” with representations of cruelty in the arts, “whether or not one intends for one’s art to express or stir compassion, to address or rectify forms of social injustice, to celebrate or relieve suffering, may end up irrelevant to its actual effects” (2011, p. 9). Whether *Nanay* was able to meet its goals is up for debate.

Drawing on Rancière (1999), Johnston and Pratt propose that theatre’s political potential, *perhaps* “rests in the opportunity it provides to blur the opposition between those who look and those who act (between passivity and the capacity to take action), and between those who are locked within their functions, roles and social identities and those who exist beyond them. The potential lies in being and not just professing an egalitarian space” (p. 40). Constructing space more evenly, whether at the scale of the local theatre, or the world, is the work of social justice. Doreen Massey wrote that the pursuit of such spaces is both “imperative” and a “fantasy” (2005, p. 153). *Migration in Performance* addresses this imperative with energy, creativity, and an ongoing openness to revision, which in a small way, may inch towards the fantasy. *If* it does so, this happens by diligently refining the fine lines that connect people together in the space of the theatre.

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