



# The Decolonial Queer Artist is Present and Refuses to Forget

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## **The Decolonial Queer Artist is Present and Refuses to Forget**

Sandeep Bakshi

In diasporic cultures, memory constitutes the archive of decolonial knowledge. This cultural archive sutures to performances of artists of colour whose bodies partake in the emergence of a decolonial aesthesis.<sup>1</sup> The process of healing from colonial wounds materialises painfully slowly through, what I call, “sensing the surface of memory” that constitutes language and other bodily sensations. The queer body itself becomes a site of decolonial performance and healing.

Working in the interstices of memory, aesthesis and diasporas, the London-based interdisciplinary artist Raju Rage, in their own words, “primarily use their non-conforming body as a vehicle of embodied knowledge.”<sup>2</sup> Their art works and performances communicate the impact of fractal colonial injuries and instantiate the possibilities to re-emerge decolonially. It is solely through a careful embrangement of language, memory and body that Rage’s decolonial aesthesis acquires its intensity and sinewy character.<sup>3</sup> The critical grammar of decoloniality though a strenuous task to describe gains visibility as the artist foregrounds their presence by a wilful refusal to forget. The act of not-forgetting, thus, operates as the key focal point of sensorial healing from colonial wounds.

In their text installation performance at Anglia Ruskin University, Cambridge, 2015 (<http://www.rajurage.com/2015/10/744/>), Rage characteristically enmeshes colonial trade, language, body and contemporary diasporic realities in a complex frame that exists/re-exists exclusively through the signifier of memory. Using commercial products of the East India Company, i.e., coffee, tea, sugar and tobacco, Rage etches the word ‘LOOT’ – meaning plunder – on the university grounds. As they explain, loot was “was the Hindustani slang for plunder: “loot” (pronounced ‘Lut’). According to the

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<sup>1</sup> Roland Vazquez and Walter Mignolo, “Decolonial AestheSis: Colonial Wounds/Decolonial Healings.” *Social Text Online* 2013. [https://socialtextjournal.org/periscope\\_article/decolonial-aesthesis-colonial-woundsdecolonial-healings/](https://socialtextjournal.org/periscope_article/decolonial-aesthesis-colonial-woundsdecolonial-healings/)

<sup>2</sup> Raju Rage personal website. <http://www.rajurage.com/who-i-am/>

<sup>3</sup> I use the word “embrangement” to accentuate the notion of both ‘wrangle’ and ‘entwine’.

Oxford English Dictionary, this word was rarely heard outside the plains of north India until the late 18th century, when it suddenly became a common term across Britain.” (<http://www.rajurage.com/2015/10/744/>). The four trade commodities served as the overarching reference to colonial exchange whereas, duplicitously, colonial trade in these products functioned as a siphoning of wealth to the seat of Empire, i.e, organised loot, to put it less euphemistically.



The four boxes containing the colonial trade items recall the activities of packing/loading/off-loading and the labour-exploitative capitalist economy that built the Empire. Additionally, remembering the origin of the word ‘loot’ signals how the archive of memory renders the colonial plunder visible since the East India Company amassed considerable wealth through their trading activities, directly responsible for the rise of bonded servitude in South Asia and other geographical spheres of the Empire. The colonial plunder, to which Rage refers, equally substantialises as the colonisation of language, reinforced through the inclusion of the Hindustani word ‘loot’ into English.

Within South Asian communities the decorative art form of Rangoli, whereby patterns of coloured rice, sand, flour, flower petals or leaves are traced on the floors or courtyards, often connects to cultural beliefs of prosperity, good luck and overall well-being. Rangolis appear during festivals, weddings and other auspicious occasions when women sketch traditional aesthetic designs, which become markers of inter(re-)generational memory. Connecting to the cultural practice of Rangoli, Rage's text installation enacts the memory of colonialism through recourse to the artistic legacy of their people(s). Even though this critical intervention and engagement with cultural heritage enables Rage to perform the act of not-forgetting the exploitative colonial trade, it wrenches the colonial wound from the domain of trade and commerce and places it securely in the field of inter-generational continuum of creativity such that the process of healing commences. As Pedro Lasch suggests, "to the decolonial artist, economists' projections are nothing but powerful fictions, and these works of the imagination may be counteracted by our own decolonial speculations and projections."<sup>4</sup> Such decolonial speculations incorporate, in Rage's art, the deployment of the body in all its non-conformity within contemporary imaginings of the diasporas and attachment of gendered labour to cultural practices of Rangoli. Rage's body, attire and movements carefully craft the contours of 'LOOT' with shades of brown, white and yellow in contrast to the vibrant reds, vermilions and greens of Rangoli. If the viewer visualises Rangoli and the labour of women, it is a partial, an incomplete visualisation since the colours and gender (of the labourer) resist conformity.

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<sup>4</sup> Pedro Lasch, "Propositions for a Decolonial Aesthetics and "Five Decolonial Days in Kassel" (Documenta 13 AND AND AND)." *Social Text Online* 2013.  
[https://socialtextjournal.org/periscope\\_article/propositions-for-a-decolonial-aesthetics-and-five-decolonial-days-in-kassel-documenta-13-and-and-and/](https://socialtextjournal.org/periscope_article/propositions-for-a-decolonial-aesthetics-and-five-decolonial-days-in-kassel-documenta-13-and-and-and/)





The claims to production of knowledge through apparatuses of formal and institutional education, writing, critical thinking, research and universities, and other forms of normative and normalising reflective inquiries have enduring narratives of Euro-American domination that resulted from violent histories of colonisation. The University as the site for Rage's installation is significant in its interaction with the theme of decolonial knowledge. The University as guarantor of knowledge, of institutional knowledge and more importantly, as a location for production of knowledge becomes associated with loot of resources and cultures in two ways. First, by referencing Rangoli, a cultural practice from South Asia and connecting it to knowledge (of loot), Rage disrupts histories of knowledge building, knowledge capital and knowledge industries of the Euro-American academy. Second, the continuing legacy of colonisation and colonial trade becomes visible through what the viewers see as products of everyday consumption. Brown and diasporic bodies are also consumed as exotic products or appear as items of fetishization in the scheme of consumption/consumerism that actively erases their histories and cultural practices.



Rage's work on memories of colonisation, language and non-conforming genders exemplifies the presence of a larger frame of queer diasporic art practitioners who enact decolonial re-emergence through rendering visible processes, thefts, appropriations and erasures that participate in their subjugation in the global north. This cohort of transnational queer artists engages critically with their personal histories of domination connecting them to wider structures of colonialism and neo-colonialism. Tendering a critique of current global empires of exploitation and systems of racial hierarchies seems crucial in our contemporary worlds. However, oppositional resistance invites backlash and has the possibility to lead to chronic exhaustion given the extent of emotional labour attached to it. Creating meaning, sensing meaning through imaginative configuration of memory, language and body, decolonial queer artists stand witness to the looting of knowledge of their peoples that accompanied the looting of commodities and economies in bygone eras of colonisation and ever-present epochs of neo-colonialism. Sensing the surface of memory empowers them to emerge

decolonially. Refusing to forget the colonial wounds does not imply a delay in healing. Instead, the will to remember is inseparable from the process of healing.

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