31

PERFORMING TELEPRESENCE

Technology and Coloniality in Choy Ka Fai's Postcolonial Spirits (2021)

Evelyn Wan

Choy Ka Fai's performance *Postcolonial Spirits* (2021) opens with the evocation of technology's troubled relationship with coloniality. On stage, we watch a dual-screen presentation of traditional Indonesian dance rituals. The ethnographic film *Trance and Dance in Bali* (1951) shot by Margaret Mead and Gregory Bateson in 1930s is juxtaposed with Choy's contemporary research "A Century of Trance in Java". The Mead and Bateson film was seen as one of the pioneers of visual anthropology, which recorded the colonial gaze of the camera on Balinese subjects dancing and entering trance states. As Choy's contemporary subjects dance in Java in full color on the other side of the screen, Mead's voice continues to narrate the happenings in the black and white footage to provide anthropological description and commentary on the ritualistic *Kris* dance. This opening scene of *Postcolonial Spirits* inaugurates the key theme for the performance, as well as the key investigation of this chapter—the relationship between technology, coloniality, and the dancing body.

Postcolonial Spirits is part of Choy Ka Fai's Cosmic Wander project where he researches the intersection between dance and spiritual and shamanic practices across Asia. In *Postcolonial Spirits*, Choy builds a multi-layered intermedial dance performance around Javanese dance Dolalak, using a variety of screens, motion capture, tele-performance, and animation. In the work, an Indonesian dancer, Andri Kurniawan, performs online via internet live-streaming, together with Dutch dancer Vincent Riebeek live on the European stage. The two dancers co-perform dance scenes as well as respond to prompts by Choy, such as answering questions about their experience working together. The live performance is interlaced with documentary footage on Dutch colonization of Indonesia, narratives about Riebeek's own family history in Indonesia, and interviews about the Dolalak. Collaborator and musician Nova Ruth also appears in projected videos to sing and share her artistic project at sea as she sails from Rotterdam to Indonesia. The Javanese dance Dolalak, which is at the center of the performance, was created in mockery of Dutch colonial soldiers, and features dancers dressed in army uniforms. Traditionally, some of the dancers would eventually become possessed and collapse in the middle of the performance. In Choy's restaging, Kurniawan's performance goes from live-streamed video projection to motion capture and eventually turns into an avatar that multiplied on the projected screen, haunting the European stage visibly as a specter of colonial history.

This chapter analyzes select vignettes from the performance based on its recorded version at TanzImAugust Berlin in August 2021 and my experience watching it live at SPRING Festival in

 DOI: 10.4324/9781003482697-36

Utrecht in May 2022. In lieu of a narrative-based analysis that focuses on the performance's developmental arc, my analysis focuses upon the piece's adoption of technology, specifically the way these technologies were staged in entanglement with the dancing body. While *Postcolonial Spirits* dives specifically into Dutch-Indonesian histories, a contextual reading of the political contexts will not form the central inquiry here. I am, instead, interested in exploring the various connections this piece has made on the body's relationship to technology and coloniality, particularly in exploring how media technology mines the body and extracts labor from it. The performance also centers the connection between dance and trance, and how the body, or rather, the overpresence of the body, has been used as a medium to communicate the presence of spirits. Drawing upon media studies, performance studies, postcolonial theory, and anthropology, the following analysis is also informed by my interview with researcher and choreographer Choy Ka Fai in April 2023, and his lecture and workshop "Telepresence in the age of extreme self" at tanz:digital in Berlin in February 2023.

Telepresence between Film and Motion Capture

Postcolonial Spirits uses a variety of screen projections, such as ethnographic film footage, a live video call and motion capture with the Indonesian performance team, dance scenes from Ballets Russes' *Scheherazade,* recorded song performance by collaborator Nova Ruth, field research interviews and TikTok videos on Dolalak, and historical photography and footage on Dutch colonialism in Indonesia. Here I focus on two scenes: the dual-screen ethnographic film *Trance and Dance in Bali* from Mead and Bateson and Choy's ethnographic film on Dolalak which opens the performance, and the motion capture of Indonesia dancer Kurniawan who goes from tele-performing as himself to performing as an avatar and as animation, which forms the climax of the performance in a penultimate scene.

The opening scene of the performance shows a dual-screen installation, a side-by-side intertextual presentation of Choy's contemporary research with historical ethnographic film footage. Intertitles appear in the beginning of both videos, explaining the folk traditions of trance. Across both the Balinese and Javanese cases, spirits would enter the dancing bodies which enable them to perform supernatural acts without hurting themselves. The calm and measured voice of Mead narrating the practices is mixed with the live music from the contemporary Javanese ritual. The footage is synchronized to show similar scenes of witches in masks dancing, followed by women dancing, and an incense and smoke ritual. Dancers across both films then enter trance states and are carried off by fellow performers. Choy's film splits into two videos with one showing TikTok footage of Dolalak, and the TikTok shorts eventually take over the entire screen.

Mead and Bateson's film was key in the history of ethnographic filmmaking, and has been critiqued for its colonialist gaze (Rony 2012). In contemporary terms, we could reread the ethnographic filmic practices as a form of data colonialism (Couldry and Meijas 2019), where life, culture, and bodily labor of the Other are captured and archived. Couldry and Meijas have argued that datafication has been part and parcel of colonial practices, where "every aspect of life must be transmuted into data" (2019, 16), that could be appropriated for value extraction. From capturing the body for labor as the enslaved to capturing the body on ethnographic film, these processes brought the colonized under the folds of colonial control. Mead and Bateson's practice while in Bali was a feverish drive toward capture—through written records, photography, and film. They saw ethnographic records, and especially media records, as a way to understand Balinese people and their cultural practices, taking "notes made against time" (Rony 2006, 12). Choy, by juxtaposing his contemporary artistic research and dance archive with Mead and Bateson, exposes

the colonialist practices of investigating trance and shamanism through recording technology, where the laboring Balinese bodies dance forever in the anthropological records, as representatives of their culture frozen in time. To what extent does Choy's contemporary interest in capturing shamanism—this time in the form of documentary, motion capture, and performance—resemble colonialist ways of recording the culture of others?

Choy shared with me his fascination with motion capture technology and the potentiality of capturing the act of trance, and by extension, the possessing spirit, in the 1s and 0s of digital code.

> The motion capture was really this very naive idea: what if I could motion capture a person in trance? Maybe it's possessed by a god or a deity. Does it mean that I could capture the presence or the spiritual presence of gods? And if I could do that, what do all the numbers and data mean? There are essentially three layers of transmission: firstly, the folk dancer of Dolalak, and secondly, when he essentially goes to trance, he's possessed by a spirit of the Dolalak. Then thirdly, this spirit is compressed into numbers, binaries of ones and zeroes, and the data is sent through the internet to Berlin [or other European cities on the tour]. And then we expand it through digital technology onto the stage as an avatar. So, if you look at it that way, the spirit becomes transnational. The presence then transmits from a body via Internet to the other body, and then it also returns the resonance of this Dutch influence in Dolalak back into a Dutch body.
>
> (Choy in discussion with author 2023; transcription edited for clarity)

This process of capture and transmission is presented in my second scene of interest during the performance of Dolalak as a live "romantic", "transnational", and "transdata duet" (Ortmann and Choy 2022, 16). Riebeek is dressed in the traditional Dolalak costume: an embroidered and embellished infantry jacket reminiscent of Dutch military uniforms, with shorts, a hat, a scarf tied around his waist, and long socks, while Kurniawan appears as an animated avatar against a black background, dancing together with him. Kurniawan's soldier avatar splits at first into two drumming soldiers. As the scene progresses, more marching band soldiers with darkened facial features appear (Figure 31.1), and the image of a colonial statue of J. B. van Heutsz (1851–1924) emerges. Van Heutsz was a celebrated hero in The Netherlands in his time, as former governor of Aceh. He was credited as the one who brought islands outside of Java under Dutch authority. Kurniawan's soldier avatars multiply around him and march around this statue, seemingly haunting van Heutsz, while Riebeek enters a lively jumping sequence. The scene closes with the avatars turning more unnatural and mannequin-like, spinning in a circle and eventually dispersing like discarded dolls behind Riebeek. The stage goes dark, with Riebeek's silhouette illuminated by the dark blue screen behind.

This scene turns Kurniawan's telepresence, or mediated presence through video, into an animated telepresence through motion capture (Figure 31.2). This telepresence can be contextualized in the discourse on presence and telepresence in theater and performance studies. Peggy Phelan (1993) famously argues that the ontology of performance lies in its disappearance, and emphasizes presence in the here and now, where it is the immediacy of experience that is foundational and gives performance its ephemeral nature. Erika Fischer-Lichte takes this idea into the phenomenology of the lived body, emphasizing that "presence arises and coexists with the performer's phenomenal body, physically resonating through the spectator's body" (2008, 98). This bodily co-presence with the audience also generates an empathetic and inter-subjective dimension that activates and affects the spectators' body (Giomi 2020). Steve Dixon points to how the sense of technology has destabilized such forms of liveness and presence, while emphasizing that "the live

Figure 31.1 Riebeek on stage with Kurniawan's multiple avatars presented in animation (Photo by Dieter Hartwig).

Figure 31.2 Studio view of Kurniawan's motion capture performance (Photo by Eddie Haryanto).

and the recorded, the virtual and the actual, clearly still differ in perceptual and phenomenological terms" (2015, 127). Gabriella Giannachi (2012) sees presence as a tool that cuts across these live and recorded environments, which enables the subject to establish relations with the physical and digital world they inhabit (50).

For Choy, the telepresence in the performance is a serendipitous result of COVID measures during the time the project was researched, rehearsed on Zoom, and staged. Eventually, the telepresence of Kurniawan became integral to the piece and *Postcolonial Spirits* continued to tour European stages with a live internet stream after pandemic restrictions on travel were lifted.

In this particular performance, Balinese dancers in 1930s, Javanese dancers in 2020s, and the spirits that possess their bodies appear as telepresence, enabled by the ethnographic film and the motion capture apparatus as a series of recording technologies that capture their performances. Here I lean toward the emphasis on the phenomenal experience that is afforded by liveness and propose to see telepresence as another form of presence that functions on a different ontological plane. What was in the "here and now" at the moment of recording was re-performed, or rather challenged to re-perform (to speak with Jon McKenzie) as telepresence on the European stage. In line with Giannachi (2012), the telepresence of Kurniawan forces viewers to make sense of the relations between the technological capture, the live dancer, and the animated dancer.

Rebecca Schneider's thesis on performance remains (2011) also sheds additional light on the ontology of telepresence and these relations presented in *Postcolonial Spirits*. Rather than disappearing into the ether, telepresence is created through data records that remain in the ethnographic archive of the Western academy and the dance archive of Choy. In staging the recording of Kurniawan's dance and trance, where the operant digital interface of motion capture is shown to the audience on a small screen, the performance performs the coloniality of data capture in real time.

Schneider critiques Western notions of history and archive that only see media and documentation as legitimated forms of memory-keeping (Schneider 2011, 99). Such epistemic positions hold that

> memory cannot be housed in a body and remain, and thus that oral storytelling, live recitation, repeated gesture, and ritual enactment are not practices of telling or writing history. Such practices disappear. By this logic, being housed always in the live, "body-to-body transmission" disappears, is lost, and thus is no transmission at all.
>
> (Schneider 2011, 99)

Following postcolonial scholar Ann Laura Stoller, Schneider points out that such archives "arrest and disable local knowledges" (2011, 100) to the point that they in fact "*demand that performance disappear* in favor of discrete remains" (2011, 100; original emphasis). Mead and Bateson's ethnographic film is one instance of such an arrest, where the local embodied knowledge of trance and spirituality became a flattened representation on screen, narrated by an American anthropologist. In the current work, the disappearance of Kurniawan's Dolalak performance into an animation of himself also seems to represent a similar logic, where his enfleshed knowledge of dancing is only to be subservient to the apparatus of capture that mediates his performance, and reforms his corporeal presence into programmable 1s and 0s. Telepresence conjures these memories "against time" (Rony 2006, 12), as extracted data that could be called on to perform at any moment of retrieval. One key difference here is of course the fact that Choy's Javanese record of Dolalak is transmitted back into a Dutch body to challenge the colonial gaze, creating a loop of knowledge transmission between the colonized and the colonizer. But on the level of intertwinement between

the technological and the corporeal, the ontology of telepresence presented in the performance remains deeply colonial and extractivist in nature, as capture and arrest.

Telepresence through motion capture turns the dancing body's labor into abstract data that is programmable. Wendy Chun argues that programmability is embedded in Foucauldian governmentality, where data becomes ordered through the act of coding (2011). In Mead and Bateson's work, the order of the trance performance is maintained through Mead's matter-of-fact narrative voice that codifies the action into a historical entry in the anthropological archive. In Choy, the beliefs, rituals, and spirituality of Javanese Dolalak culture become a malleable animation, the medium through which the artist could put forward his critical statement on Dutch colonialism. In both cases, the actual cultural experience of dance and trance disappear into the apparatus, almost as an enigmatic presence that could not be read, or as something that exceeds the affordance of the recording technology. After all, the possession of spirits is not visible to the naked eye, and is only mediated by the convulsing performance of the dancers' bodies.

These two scenes show the body's role as the producer of data to be captured (through the camera lens, or the newer technology of motion capture through bodysuits, cameras, and sensors). Corporeality disappears into the archive and reappears as data. Where then is the agency of the laboring body in its mediation of culture and ritual in the archive? How much of its cultural meaning is legible?

Of Mimicry and Partial Presence

Dolalak as a performance was first generated as a mimicry of Dutch soldiers. According to the interview played during *Postcolonial Spirits*, villagers from Sejiwan chanced upon dancing Dutch soldiers at their station. They observed the dance and the singing of "do la la" by the soldiers. Villagers from neighboring areas like Kaliharjo then developed the dance which formed the original choreography in the 1930s for entertainment and mockery. Trance was later on added in the 1950s, when shamans and dancers collaborated with spirits in their performances (Pamungkas 2020). From singing and dancing Dutch soldiers came the colonial mimicry of military uniforms which had distinctive Indonesian elements in fabric choice and embroidery. The Dolalak also came with its own characteristics of trance that marked a clear departure from the original Dutch military culture.

In Homi Bhabha's "Of Mimicry and Man: The ambivalence of the colonial discourse" (1984), he calls mimicry a "partial presence" (1984, 128). Mimicry refers to how colonial power desires for the mimicry of the colonized, where the colonized demonstrates their subservience to the colonizers through copying them. These imitations do not quite rupture the dominance of colonial discourse, but fixes the colonized subject as somewhat incomplete, as "almost the same but not quite" and "almost the same but not white" (Bhabha 1984, 130).

However, they also subvert that power by making mimicry look like mockery. The colonizers fear this outcome, as it would undermine their perceived separateness and elevated status.

Mimicry is not only central to the Dolalak, but is also used in *Postcolonial Spirits* as a dramaturgical device. As discussed in the first section, Choy mimics ethnographic film. Then the dancers perform disloyal copies of dance scenes and movements from Orientalist ballet *Scheherazade*. When Dolalak is finally performed, reversal of colonial mimicry is at the center of it. It is the white Dutch dancer Riebeek who now has to mimic his Indonesia counterpart in their duet.

Mimicry is marked by "its slippage, its excess, its difference" (Bhabha 1984, 126). In the performance, Riebeek's contemporary dance training from School for New Dance Development (SNDO, Amsterdam University of the Arts) betrays him and it is very clear to the audience that he

is not classically trained in Indonesian folk dancing. This unfaithful copy is a deliberate dramaturgical choice on the part of the makers, and Riebeek is not supposed to master the dance.

> Choy: I have a kind of romantic idea of a conceptual loop, of transmitting this dance back into a Dutch body – that is the thinking behind making the show. […] [Riebeek] learned Dolalak through the documentation and doesn't do it perfectly. But that artifact or "noise" arising from his kind of inaccuracy is what makes the beauty of the show.
>
> (Ortmann and Choy 2022, 16)

In this reversal of mimicry, Riebeek's body is marked by a series of partial presences: of necessary skill, of appropriate cultural entrainment, of fidelity to Dolalak, and ultimately, of the partial performance of trance. At one point, Choy throws flower petals at Riebeek and he collapses, staging an act that represents trance, an incomplete and deliberately flawed mimicry. From this perspective, these partial presences emphasize the critical potential of mimicry as a dramaturgical device.

However, while the performance seems to have made a fool out of Riebeek's white body as a representative of Dutch colonial pasts through his clumsy imitation of Dolalak, the use of motion capture technology and animation places Kurniawan in an equally disadvantaged position. If the Dolalak's power lies in its status as colonial mimicry and mockery, it is blocked from being performed in its entirety and is disarmed through its telepresence. Through the mediation of motion capture, Kurniawan appears as another series of partial presences: the corporeal dancing body is only partially there because it is performed through the mediation of animated avatars. A partially present low-resolution version of Dolalak is rendered on screen, where the intricate finger movements common in Indonesian folk dances are not tracked and sacrificed for better live-streaming and computational processing.

These partial presences present a state of ambivalence where the actual mediumship of the body in trance only became visible through bodily data appearing as re-ordered animation. The captured data's programmability renders it subservient to the logic of control and governmentality, here in the form of animation. As Heather Warren-Crow argues,

> [animated] bodies are evidence of highly rational forms of measurement and control; the more mobile, energetic, and animated the [animated] body (the more alive, according to the rhetoric of animation), the more effectively it is captured.
>
> (2017, 27)

In her article on animation created through motion capture, Warren-Crow challenges the history of primitivism in animation, "which has long considered dance to be central to the technological process of extracting and circulating an ancient, pre-rational energy" (2017, 27), and traces a history of hyperanimation of primitivized beings from animals to native Others. The vitality of the dancer becomes spectacularized through animated effects that exaggerate their movement qualities.

Similarly, the vitality of Kurniawan is capitalized in the performance and sensationalized as multiplying avatars take over the screen projection behind the solo Riebeek. And while the white man could appear fully fleshed, singular, and live, the colonized Other could only appear through archival re-renderings, obediently performing through coded animation, as digital phantoms. Warren-Crow's term "high-tech techno-primitive" (2017, 38) seems to ring true here in the motion capture and subsequent animation of Dolalak dance and trance—almost in trance, but not quite; almost in mockery of Dutch colonizers, but not quite. If we consider motion capture as a continuation of the colonial recording technology of film, then *Postcolonial Spirits* exposes the continued

fascination and fetishization of colonized bodies by these technologies. The colonial mimicry as mockery and as reclaiming of local culture could only appear as partial presence and in partial agency—a partial critique then, overshadowed by the governmentality of recording machines and the logics of animation.

As argued in the preceding section, recording technology's relationship to the body elicits performance and labor that follows the logic of colonial extraction through datafication. Datafication also means further processing and programming of the data collected. I turn here once again to the ethnographic film in the opening scene of *Postcolonial Spirits* to show how programmability also appears in this earlier technology, and is continued by motion capture.

The rules under which the film was shot reveal the programmed and manipulated nature of its recording. Mead's ethnographic film was shot in the day due to limitations of equipment, even though the *Kris* dances were usually performed at night. Older women who usually danced it were also replaced by younger women, by choice of Mead's informants. Bateson, in the hopes of saving expensive film footage, shot at a rate of 16 frames instead of the usual 24 frames, meaning that the performance of trance was recoded and managed in terms of speed (Seckinger 1991).

In *Cinema, Trance, and Cybernetics,* Ute Holl describes an anecdote where university professor Karl Heider slowed down the footage and played it at the intended rate of 16 frames to his anthropology students. Twitchy and seemingly hysterical movements of trance became "long undulations" (2017, 58), and Mead's voice was distorted; it dropped an octave, making her sound like a man.

> The regularity of the film projector could only present either the cultural integrity of the anthropologist or that of the Balinese, and when Heider pulled back the tempo of the mechanism, thus violating the correct cultural identity of the anthropologist, he put the film apparatus at the service of Balinese culture.
>
> (Heider 2017, 58)

Despite being an analogue film, the data collected was also subject to manipulation by their makers. The speed of the dance and trance was reprogrammed, where the voice of Mead dictated the pace at which the film was played.

Whether ethnographic film or motion capture, both technologies, by way of data's amenability to reprogramming, failed to mediate the corporeal experience of dance and trance in a way that respected the original cultural context and practice. The corporeality of trance can only appear as a partial presence. How might we, then, further understand trance and the spirits performing possession in the performance?

On the Overpresence of the Body as Resistance

The spirit of Raden Sosro is credited as a "supernatural presence" in the performance.

Interviewer (off-screen): When the dancers enter trance, what is actually happening? And whose souls are trying to enter the dancers?

Prawirodirjo: There are three levels of souls in the supernatural trance world. The lowest level soul is the danyang, the guardian soul of a place. During a Dolalak performance, these spirits join the dance freely. They are usually looking for food, flowers, or incense. The second one could be a ghost pretending to be a particular pepunden (Great Saint), but it is

just a common soul. The third one is the real pepunden (Great Saint), a human soul that is intelligent and able to perceive its realness.

Interviewer: Could you describe its shape?

Prawirodirjo: Yes. Its shape usually follows its space; his name is Raden Sosro. He is the sovereign of the Dolalak here. His shape is similar to human, but we cannot see him.

The above interview appears as a documentary video on stage, where head shaman Jono Prawirodirjo shares what actually happens in the trance. Prawirodirjo belongs to the last remaining male troupe (Budi Santoso Dolalak) which who dances the traditional dance as transmitted in the original notation in 1930s, where Kurniawan is also trained.

In the footage of *Kris* dance and Dolalak, we see the felt presence of spirit possession as an overpresence of the body. Métraux (1958) explains the signs of possession as follows:

> People possessed start by giving an impression of having lost control of their motor system. Shaken by spasmodic convulsions, they pitch forward, as though projected by a spring, turn frantically round and round, stiffen and stay still with body bent forward, sway, stagger, save themselves, again lose balance, only to fall finally in a state of semi-consciousness.
>
> (120, as cited in Schmidt and Huskinson 2011, 3)

Taken over by uncontrolled bodily movements, the bodies paradoxically enter into a state of stiffness where their corporeal overpresence takes over.

After watching *Postcolonial Spirits*, I am left wondering whether spirits resisted the apparatus of recording and transmission through the archive, preferring instead corporeal transmissions through embodied rituals in the community, and whether there was a fundamental mismatch between these bodily excesses and the capabilities of recording technologies. Body-to-body transmissions, according to Schneider, have been left out of consideration in the Western episteme, and are considered "lost". These recording technologies, built within the knowledge conditions of the West, would not be able to sufficiently attend to the sensorial qualities of embodied rituals. I also question the legibility of trance bodies inscribed within the spaces of Western European theater. Rather than being able to discern "supernatural presence", we instead could only observe bodies falling, flailing, and fellow performers rushing to their side. In Rony's critique of Mead and Bateson's film, she argued that trance was "anthropologized away" (2008, 6), where the possibility that Balinese men and women were indeed possessed by spirits and gods were made into a belief that belonged to the exotic other and then dismissed. In some way, one could make a similar observation that motion capture "datafied away" the embodied nature of spirit possession.

To further understand the overpresence of bodies in trance, and the political potential of spirit possession, I turn to Aihwa Ong's seminal Malaysian study, *Spirits of Resistance and Capitalist Discipline* ([1987] 2010). In the book, Ong argues that spirit possession and trance imbued women on the factory floor in Malaysia in 1970s–1980s with the ability to challenge the capitalist factory discipline expected of their bodies, as industrialization took over the country. This historical instance suggests that the overpresence of the body, that which is possessed, functions as an excessive force that generates resistance against capitalism. Ong sees in the episodes of spirit possession "the unconscious beginnings of an idiom of protest against labor discipline and male control in the modern industrial situation" (2010, 207). In one cited incident, a woman began sobbing, laughing,

and shrieking, as she flailed at factory machinery, citing a sighting of *hantu*, a were-tiger. The factory she was at was allegedly a former burial ground for aboriginal groups, and therefore disturbed earth, and grave spirits as well as were-tigers would haunt the factory floor. In some accounts, a possessed woman would become so strong that it would take 10–20 people to handle her (Ong 2010, 207–208).

Ong proposes that "spirit attacks were indirect retaliations against coercion and demands for justice in personal terms within the industrial milieu" (2010, 220). The overpresence of these women in trance as uncontrollable bodies shows that the body, and its materiality as a spiritual medium, could function as a technology of resistance against capitalistic incursion. The flesh itself could become supernaturally strong, defying normative understandings of the body as well as the structures of governance that keep it in place, such as within factory discipline.

Viewing Dolalak in Ong's light opens up the possibility of thinking through trance as a form of resistance. From the colonial mimicry in Dolalak dance, the dance gains another layer of meaning as trance performance becomes incorporated. The overpresence of corporeality that allows the dancers to perform supernatural acts appears as a form of excess that takes colonial mimicry beyond mockery and into a realm of resistance. Trance, as a practice, is unassimilable to Western discourse, and challenges Western epistemologies of knowing. Its staging in *Postcolonial Spirits* continues this opacity, in its refusal to be transmitted to Riebeek's white body. On the European stage, trance does not appear as overpresence, but rather as incomplete presence, or even absence, tamed by technological interventions of ethnographic film and motion capture that limited the presence and thereby power of the corporeal body.

Meanwhile the transmission of Dolalak and its resistant spirit continue to evolve over time, not banished to history like Mead and Bateson's grainy black and white film might lead us to believe. The dance and trance performance finds a new audience through TikTok. The account @dewi.arum_story featured in *Postcolonial Spirits* shows the evolution of Dolalak from a male-only dance to a female dance, where the dancers adapt the costume to a tight-fitting, sexually attractive outfit, with sunglasses to add to the cool factor. Dolalak dance has been updated into digital performances with loud, contemporary Indonesian pop, hiphop, and electronic music. They are also edited at times with exaggerated slow-motions and video filters familiar to the TikTok aesthetic. This transformation is an example of how the dance and trance culture refuses to be frozen in time, as backward and primitive, in the time of the "there and then" (Fabian 1983), to use the critical term of anthropologist Johannes Fabian. Instead, it has a staggering 1.8 million followers online, at the time of my writing.

This TikTok account shows Indonesians' capitalization of the attention economy and their use of social media to promote their cultural heritage. This time, they are wielding the camera lens as makers, not as objects to be captured, narrating through text on video and in captions what particular aspects of the performance mean in Bahasa Indonesia. This transition marks a new era in representation, departing from Mead's anthropologizing narrative to presenting Dolalak in their dancing bodies, their own voice, writings, and hashtags. Where is the agency of self in this technologized era, and to what extent can the formerly colonized use technology to speak back to the practices of anthropology that tried to freeze them in primitive pasts?

When the European team of *Postcolonial Spirits* finally performed in Indonesia in 2022, Choy invited the Dewi Arum TikTok troupe to join the performance at one of the world's largest Buddhist monuments in Borobudur. By chance, a massive rainstorm delayed the performance by 40 minutes, and much of the performance had to be cut. In the end, this one-night-only non-telepresent version of the performance had Riebeek dancing together with Kurniawan among 15 female dancers from

the Dewi Arum troupe. The audience members joined in afterward, turning it into a massive dance party. In my interview with him, Choy stated with a smile,

> Maybe I'm a bit too sentimental but I felt like it returned Dolalak, the presence or the function of it, to what it is; it is to give this sort of connection with people because once this Indonesian music goes, everyone gyrates to the music!
>
> (Choy in discussion with author 2023; transcription edited for clarity)

Concluding Remarks

Postcolonial Spirits performs telepresence, partial presence and over presence of the body in the intersections of technology, coloniality, and spirituality in ways that offer spaces of exploration, experimentation, and resistance.

The apparatus of the theater opens up this space of exploration, where the staging of dancing bodies live and mediated brought the colonial dance of Dolalak to the European stage, with its haunting telepresence of spirit possession. As proposed by Luckhurst and Morin, theater has a particular "suitability for the suggested presence, or the present yet absent" (2014, 5) where the theatrical imagination makes space for what is seen and unseen. After all, theater histories include many ghost plays like *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*, and *Postcolonial Spirits*, in playing with disembodied telepresences through contemporary technologies, continues this spectral tradition.

In my reading, the work shows the implication of performance as an episteme, as a structure of knowing that intervenes in postcolonial cultures. It questions performance's relationship with recording technology and the extent to which it mimics imperial logics of capture and archive. In playing with media in its dramaturgy, the performance shows the limitation of the recording apparatus, the loss of data in its renderings, and the programmability of collected data.

In staging dance, *Postcolonial Spirits* also emphasizes the presence and overpresence of the dancing body, inviting reflections on its materiality and its potentials as corporeal resistance. Perhaps more than the exotic dimensions of trance, dance rituals allow people to come together in co-presence as forms of political organizing and action (Martin 1998; Foster 2003; Kloetzel 2019). In trance's refusal to appear through technological representation, it brings to the fore the importance of Diana Taylor's repertoire of embodied memory

> performed through dance, theatre, song, ritual, witnessing, healing practices, memory paths, and the many other forms of repeatable behaviors as something that cannot be housed or contained in the archive.
>
> (Taylor 2003, 37)

Such repertoires and bodily memories serve as a critical counterpoint to the colonizing desires of the archival impulse. It may be that Choy's research project extends an invitation to recenter performance and ritualistic bodily practice as valid ways of knowing: in the form of a massive dance party, perhaps, of Indonesians celebrating the Dolalak story of colonial mimicry, mockery, and resistance; or an assembly that restates the importance of bodily co-presence, after pandemic-instigated Zoom rituals of telepresence.

In both *Postcolonial Spirits* and *Trance and Dance in Bali*, telepresence fails to convey trance and its political potentials through mediated performance and film. *Postcolonial Spirits* spends more time telling stories of the historical context of Dutch occupation of Indonesia, than revealing the spiritual depths of those who practice Dolalak dance and ritual. *Trance and Dance in Bali*

mutes the natives for the sake of Mead's narrative, and does not give them the possibility to narrate their experiences. Both examples prove all too well that telepresence turns presence into digital records, ripe for data processing, ready for the archive. While dance as a technology of the body holds critical potential for resistance, its technologizing through mediation makes it all too amenable to coding, encoding, and recoding in the controlled logic of data colonialism (Couldry and Meijas 2019) and programmability (Chun 2011).

In closing, I want to re-situate telepresence in the words of one of its early proponents, Marvin Minsky. His imagination of telepresence in the 1980s was more akin to robotics than to video calls and screens.

> You don a comfortable jacket lined with sensors and muscle-like motors. Each motion of your arm, hand, and fingers is reproduced at another place by mobile, mechanical hands. Light, dexterous, and strong, these hands have their own sensors through which you see and feel what is happening. Using this instrument, you can "work" in another room, in another city, in another country, or on another planet.
>
> (Minsky 1980)

Telepresence in his definition is completely tied up with labor, though not as an absorption of laboring bodies, but as a way to care for them. Telepresence was proposed to improve safety for high-risk workplaces such as nuclear plants and mines. Rather than datafication and colonialist extraction, telepresence in Minsky's vision was to free humans from the detriments and risks of labor, to augment our corporeality in a way that preserves its safety, for "better, richer, and longer lives" (Minsky 1980). With this ideal goal in mind, how might we reclaim and appropriate telepresence and its apparatus of recording technologies from their colonialist histories, desires, and tendencies? How might we center the sanctity of the body and its embodiment in the midst of telepresence and the ever-growing drives toward datafication in our current age of data colonialism?

References

Bhabha, Homi. 1984. "Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse." *October* 28: 125. https://doi.org/10.2307/778467.

Choy, Ka Faic. 2021. *Postcolonial Spirits*. Performance.

Choy, Ka Fai. 2023. "Telepresence in the Age of the Extreme Self." *Presented at the tanz:digital, Art Center Kunstquartier Bethanien*, February 6. https://www.iti-germany.de/meldung/tanzdigital-eroeffnung-jetzt-abrufbar.

Chun, Wendy Hui Kyong. 2011. *Programmed Visions: Software and Memory*. Reprint edition. Cambridge: MIT Press.

Couldry, Nick, and Ulises A. Mejias. 2019. *The Costs of Connection: How Data Is Colonizing Human Life and Appropriating It for Capitalism*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

"Dewi Arum (@dewi.Arum_story)." TikTok. Accessed November 1, 2023. https://www.tiktok.com/@dewi.arum_story.

Dixon, Steve. 2015. *Digital Performance: A History of New Media in Theater, Dance, Performance Art, and Installation*. Cambridge: MIT Press.

Fabian, Johannes. 1983. *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Fischer-Lichte, Erika. 2008. *The Transformative Power of Performance*. London and New York: Routledge.

Foster, Susan Leigh. 2003. "Choreographies of Protest." *Theatre Journal* 55 (3): 395–412.

Giannachi, Gabriella. 2012. "Environmental Presence." In *Archaeologies of Presence: Art, Performance and the Persistence of Being*, edited by Gabriella Giannachi, Nick Kaye, and Michael Shanks, 50–63. London: Routledge.

Giomi, Andrea. 2020. "Towards an Ontology of Digital Arts. Media Environments, Interactive Processes and Effects of Presence." *Rivista Di Estetica* 73 (April): 47–65. https://doi.org/10.4000/estetica.6715.

Holl, Ute. 2017. *Cinema, Trance and Cybernetics*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press.

Kloetzel, Melanie. 2019. "Site Dance as Activist Methodology: Creating Performance/Protest in Sites of Assembly." *Choreographic Practices* 10 (1): 7–23. https://doi.org/10.1386/chor.10.1.7_1.

Luckhurst, Mary, and Emilie Morin. 2014. "Introduction: Theatre and Spectrality." In *Theatre and Ghosts: Materiality, Performance and Modernity*, edited by Mary Luckhurst and Emilie Morin, 1–23. Springer London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Martin, Randy. 1998. *Critical Moves: Dance Studies in Theory and Politics*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

McKenzie, Jon. 2002. *Perform or Else: From Discipline to Performance*. New York and London: Routledge.

Mead, Margaret, and Gregory Bateson, dirs. 1951. *Trance and Dance in Bali*. US Library of Congress. https://www.loc.gov/item/mbrs02425201/.

Métraux, Alfred. 1958. *Voodoo in Haiti*. Translated by Hugo Charteris. New York: New Schocken Books.

Minsky, Marvin. 1980. "Telepresence." *OMNI Magazine*, June 1980. https://web.media.mit.edu/~minsky/papers/Telepresence.html.

Ong, Aihwa. 1987. *Spirits of Resistance and Capitalist Discipline: Factory Women in Malaysia*. 2nd edition. Suny Series in the Anthropology of Work. Albany, NY: Suny Press.

Ortmann, Lucie, and Choy Ka Fai. 2022. "Envisioning Future Bodies: Choy Ka Fai's Experimental Practice at the Interface of Choreography, Media Art and Archival Processes." *MAP - Media, Archive, Performance* 12.

Pamungkas, Abdul Baasit. 2020. *Inkorporasi Kebudayaan Rakyat (Studi Kasus: Integrasi Kesenian Tari Dolalak Ke Dalam Kebudayaan Nasional)*. Jakarta: Universitas Islam Negeri, Syarif Hidayatu Hidayatulla Jakarta.

Phelan, Peggy. 1993. *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance*. New York and London: Routledge.

Rony, Fatimah Tobing. 2008. "The Photogenic Cannot Be Tamed: Margaret Mead and Gregory Bateson's Trance and Dance in Bali." *Discourse* 28 (1): 5–27. https://doi.org/10.1353/dis.2008.0006.

Schmidt, Bettina E., and Lucy Huskinson. 2011. *Spirit Possession and Trance: New Interdisciplinary Perspectives*. London: Bloomsbury Academic.

Schneider, Rebecca. 2011. *Performing Remains: Art and War in Times of Theatrical Reenactment*. London and New York: Routledge.

Seckinger, Beverly. 1991. "Filming Culture: Interpretation and Representation in Trance and Dance in Bali (1951), A Balinese Trance Seance (1980), and Jero on Jero: A Balinese Trance Seance Observed (1980)." *CVA Review: Revue de La Commission d'anthropologie Visuelle*, Spring 1991: 27–33.

Taylor, Diana. 2003. *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press. https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822385318.

Warren-Crow, Heather. 2017. "Before and After Ghostcatching." *Screen Bodies* 2 (1), n.p. https://doi.org/10.3167/screen.2017.020103.