

Diane Weiss Memorial Lecture

Spring 2018, Issue 2



*Bare and Spare:
The Charisma of
the Skeletal?
Featuring:
Sumathi
Rumaswamy*

This act runs the risk of tragedy by equating the 'other' with aesthetics...

On April 5th, the FGSS program's annual Diane Weiss Memorial Lecture took place in the Daniel Family Commons. Each year, this lecture honors the influential work of Diane Weiss, who was the first person to graduate with a Women's Studies major at Wesleyan in 1980. Sumathi Rumaswamy, a professor of history and comparative studies at Duke University, prepared a presentation on Mahatma Gandhi's "bare and spare body" as it appears to us both when he was alive, and in his death through the visual arts. This lecture discussed the various ways we view the Mahatma's body in visual arts as a bare bodied male personage. Professor Rumaswamy also explores the ways in which his body is received has been informed by how we have been taught

to view the male ascetic body in religious traditions.

The first part of the lecture covered the ways in which Gandhi has been depicted over time by other political figures and by the media. Professor Rumaswamy specifically cites how Winston Churchill, a prominent British politician rebukes Gandhi for being "half-naked." She questions why Gandhi's bare body provokes such a visceral reaction that causes white people to feel as though they are in danger. Gandhi has been considered a spectre of the partly clad for visual consumption that is one of fear, horror, and desire. Professor Rumaswamy notes how Gandhi's spare body is indicative of his own act of decolonizing his body. However, there is something

to note about a partly clad male body that is on display.

The next section of her presentation covered the "Arithmetic of Undress." Rumaswamy sets forth that Gandhi actually considered himself "overdressed" in the ways in which he presented himself. He was in fact chosen to be portrayed as "nude" even though he was not. His traditional dhoti was described crudely as a "loincloth." The dhoti, is in fact, usually worn by the poorest in India. This poor "nakedness" caused not only British anxiety, but also middle class Indian anxiety. However, the act of "shedding" was productive for his decolonizing processes. She then went on to discuss the "Chemistry of Color" of Gandhi's bare body. Gandhi's brown body was often shown

in artwork as glowing, giving it more of a royal or “kingly” quality. Gandhi’s bare brown body became the symbol of anti-colonial resistance and accompanying dhoti became the new uniform of the Indian National Movement. There is indeed a certain racial economy of empire that accompanies the brown body-- it is both agreeable to the eye and at the same time “white but not quite” as Rumaswamy notes.

Rumaswamy ruminates on the difference between leading a bare life versus performing bareness. Gandhi wanted to reduce himself to nothing because he believed that by emptying his body, then God will possess him. This led him to both shed his worldly goods,

as well as perform periodic fasts as a weapon against the colonial state. He would then put his own starving body on display by rendering himself bare. However, there is something uneasy in the way in which Gandhi performs bareness. This is because all of colonial India appeared skeletal because they were dying from starvation. Rumaswamy believes that Gandhi was impersonating the peasant in his own upper-class body. She states that this act runs the risk of tragedy by equating the “other” with aesthetics, when in fact the people of India were clearly dying. It is scandalous when the skeletal is aesceticized and thus, Rumaswamy concludes by questioning if Gandhi is complicit in this

scandal.

The lecture concluded with a lively Question and Answer session, where students and professors alike asked questions regarding Gandhi, visibility, art, bareness, and the male and gazes in which viewer’s possess.

Following the lecture was a dinner in a private room in Usdan, where the Professor Rumaswamy sat down to talk with students and professors that attended the lecture that had lingering questions about the presentation and how to move forward with the information that we have.

Piece By: Jackie Manginelli

