**Decolonizing Human Exhibits: dance, re-enactment and historical fiction**

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**Abstract**: This article focuses on decolonizing exhibition practices and colonial archives. It begins with a survey of literature on nineteenth-century colonial exhibitions and world’s fairs as a cultural practice and the complicity of academic disciplines such as anthropology and ethnology in promoting violent forms of pedagogy. Next, the article examines the failed Liberty’s 1885 exhibition in London, specifically analyzing the *nautch* dancers whose moving bodies both engaged and disrupted the scopophilia framing such live human exhibits. In the final section, the article examines how re-imagining the Liberty’s *nautch* experiences by embodying archival slippages might be a usefully anarchic way of exhuming the memories of those dancers forgotten by both British and Indian nationalist history. The article delineates the structural limitations of reenactments, a current trend in contemporary Euro-American dance, and it argues that historical fiction as a corporeal methodology might be a viable decolonizing strategy for dance studies.

**Keywords**: dance, *nautch*, South Asia, colonial exhibitions, human zoos, race relations, re-enactment

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In September 2014, *Exhibit B*, a live performance installation featuring black performers and curated by the white South African director Brett Bailey, was forced to close down following a social media campaign and a large public protest outside The Barbican Theatre in London. Bailey’s anti-imperial reenactment of colonial exhibitions was designed to offer a critique of nineteenth-century ‘human zoos’ where colonized bodies were displayed as objects, connecting that deeply racist past with the plight of present-day asylum seekers and immigrants around the Mediterranean basin who were installed as ‘found objects’. The show backfired badly in London amidst questions of unequal representation, covert power and ‘complicit racism’, which in turn prompted The Barbican to accuse protestors of censoring artistic freedom (Muir 2014).

As Katrin Sieg suggests, the event clearly signaled the urgent need for ‘more differentiated engagements with the ethics of confronting a violent, racist history, the dramaturgy of interracial encounter and the politics of decolonizing cultural institutions’ (2015, 250). I often bring this controversial performance event and its attendant debates to my classroom when I ask British students of theatre and dance studies to debate the politics of race and positionality in performance. Such politically charged material within a pedagogical context inevitably introduces an affective charge to the space of learning: the horror of my students as they encounter the phenomenon of the ‘human zoos’ for the first time is matched by the horror I feel upon learning that a majority of my students have little to no knowledge of Britain’s deeply racist and violent colonial past. The erasure from the national school curriculum of the knowledge of Britain’s colonization of lands and its systematic loot, plunder and genocide in its colonies in recent history – its inglorious past, to use popular historian Shashi Tharoor’s (2016) words – is indicative of a crafting of British nationalist history that has little regard for the collective memory of several diasporic constituencies.

This article, following Sieg’s prompt to decolonize cultural institutions, focuses on decolonizing exhibition practices and the colonial archives. It notices how traditions of display and curation in the Euro-American exhibition model are framed by unequal colonial power structures, and argues that an embodied and creative encounter with such violent pasts may provide an ethical step towards decolonization. The article begins with a survey of literature on nineteenth-century colonial exhibitions and world’s fairs as a cultural practice and the complicity of academic disciplines such as anthropology and ethnology in promoting violent forms of pedagogy. Next, the article examines one particular colonial exhibition, the failed Liberty’s 1885 exhibition in London, and specifically analyzes the *nautch* dancers whose moving bodies both engaged and disrupted the scopophilia framing such live human exhibits. In the final section, the article examines how re-imagining the Liberty’s *nautch* experience by embodying archival silences and slippages might be a usefully anarchic way of exhuming the memories of those dancers forgotten by both British and Indian nationalist history. By locating my own performance lecture on the Liberty *nautch* dancers within the current trend of reenactments in contemporary Euro-American dance, the article delineates the structural limitations of such reenactments and argues that historical fiction as a corporeal methodology might be a viable decolonizing strategy for dance studies.

**Race on Display: human exhibits and pedagogical violence**

In the past few decades, colonial Euro-American museum and exhibition practices have been carefully scrutinized in multiple fields, including history and art history, anthropology, ethnology and cultural studies. Some of the earliest research on colonial exhibitions by Allwood (1977) and Altick (1978) focused on the British Empire’s insatiable hunger for objects and products collected from its colonies and on the importance of displaying these in Britain as spectacles for a curious public with little access to global travel. In the 1980s, a number of important studies further highlighted the direct relationship between European and US colonial expansion and exhibiting practices. Rydell explored the US empire and its dominion over lands and peoples, noting how, to organizers such as George Brown Goode of the Smithsonian, the world’s fair illustrated “the steps of progress of civilization and its arts in successive centuries, and in all lands up to the present time”; it would become, “in fact, an illustrated encyclopedia of humanity of civilization” (1984, 45).

Rydell’s study explored how fairs such as the Chicago World’s Columbia Exposition of 1893 featured ethnographic exhibits curated by the Smithsonian and Peabody museums, and noticed how they were necessary to educate and ‘formulate the Modern’ (ibid, 45). The Smithsonian exhibit of 1893, according to Rydell, ‘provided the cement for integrating ideas about progress and race into an ideological whole’ (ibid, 27). However, cementing this ideology occurred much earlier in Britain and in other parts of Europe such as France, Germany and Spain. Europe’s perceived racial and civilizational superiority over other ‘savage races’ resulted in the practice of putting ‘natives’ on display in public fairs from the fifteenth century onwards, but the Industrial Revolution and advancements in technology took exhibition practices to an international level in the mid-nineteenth century. Greenhalgh (1988) and Hoffenberg (2001) put Britain’s 1851 Great Exhibition of the Industry of all Nations at a watershed moment in the history of international exhibitions, ushering in an era of heated competition between European colonial empires, mainly between the French, German, Dutch and the British, and the new US empire. The Great Exhibition of 1851, also known as the Crystal Palace exhibition (named after the vast building covering nineteen acres and erected in London’s Hyde Park for the sole purpose of housing it), set a standard template for other international ones in terms of creating four categories of exhibits: Manufactures, Machinery, Raw Materials and Fine Arts; and Greenhalgh noted how themes such as international peace, education, trade and progress were at their theoretical core (1988, see chapter one). Later studies on exhibition practices focused on the importance of visual representation to empire’s progress. Breckenridge studied how objects from India were taken out of their everyday contexts and turned into a ‘spectacle of the ocular’ (1989, 196), and how the systematically categorized displays maintained a visual illusion of order and control that provided an antidote to an otherwise disturbing and chaotic colonial experience. Corbey wrote that in human ethnological exhibits, ‘the citizen’s gaze on alien people was determined to a considerable degree by stories and stereotypes in his or her mind’ (1993, 361), and that the motto ‘To see is to know’ became the ‘underlying ideology that is at work in a range of seemingly disparate practices in colonial times: photography, colonialist discourse, missionary discourse, anthropometry, collecting and exhibiting’ (ibid, 360). By the mid-1990s, Tony Bennett had coined ‘exhibitionary complex’ to include along with art museums, history and natural science museums, dioramas and panoramas, national and international exhibitions, and department stores, “which served as linked sites for the development and circulation of new disciplines (history, biology, art history, anthropology) and their discursive formations (the past, evolution, aesthetics, man) as well as for the development of new technologies of vision” (1995, 59).

Bennett argued that the ‘exhibitionary complex’ ran parallel and in juxtaposition to Foucault’s notion of the ‘carceral archipelago’, in which objects and bodies were transferred from private spaces and collections to public displays for the masses. The spectacles offered by objects in museums were intended for individuals to know themselves as the subject of knowledge and to engage in a ‘voluntarily self-regulating citizenry’ (ibid, 63).

This literature points to the encyclopedic nature of colonial expositions and fairs, including inventories of all cultures of the world and a crafting of a history of the ‘human race’, with some peoples considered superior (morally, intellectually, technologically, and economically) and others primitive or barbaric on a linear scale of progress. This spectacular narrative, which legitimized colonial rule and appropriation in Europe, was paralleled by the huge efforts of the colonial state apparatus to justify the cost and hardship associated with colonial conquest abroad (Auerbach 2002, 3). Alongside focusing on the taxonomic impulse to categorize races and their cultural products, the studies mentioned above pay attention to the relationship between colonial exhibitions and pedagogy on a mass-scale. The consensus amongst writers is that the most vicious yet acceptable form of nineteenth-century imperialist ideology and contemporary social Darwinism framed the human exhibits. ‘Savages’ were displayed for Euro-American citizens for what we today call ‘edutainment’, with the supply of ‘natives’ to exhibits following close on the heels of a colonial conquest. Moreover, as Coombes (1994) has found, conflicting representations of exhibited peoples or cultures, for instance of Africa, were circulated often in the exhibitions, depending on political or disciplinary imperatives.

The display of exotic people in colonial exhibitions ran parallel to nineteenth century circuses and freak shows run by producers such as Phineas Taylor Barnum (1810 - 1891), which mainly focused on entertaining the masses. From 1874 until World War I, the animal trainer and trader Carl Hagenbeck (1844 - 1913) of Hamburg exhibited nomadic Sámi (‘Laplanders’), Nubians from Egyptian Sudan, North American Indians, people from India, Inuits and Zulus across several German and other European cities in his *Volkerschau* (ethnic or folk shows). These were framed as ‘anthropological-zoological exhibitions’ or *Anthropologisch-Zoologische Ausstellung*. Not all human exhibits were treated the same by curators of exhibitions. As Thode-Arora (2014, 79) notes, the ethnic shows were a complex phenomenon, sometimes featuring people who were abducted or kept under poor conditions and sometimes, as with the Hagenbeck company, with professional contracts that formalized food and accommodation, medical care, fees and performance schedules. Roslyn Poignant notes how Indigenous Australians transformed themselves into accomplished performers in order to survive the brutal tours, in the process becoming ‘professional “savages”’ (2004, 4). Jensen (2018) notes that certain cultures, such as those of India’s, could not be easily labelled ‘primitive’ or ‘savage’ within the exhibitionary complex, as it was deemed to be an ancient (albeit pre-modern) civilization. Despite some differences in experiences, human labour in ethnic shows and exhibits was extremely profitable for producers, although human lives were dispensable. Many natives travelling for human exhibits lost their lives and never made it back to their homelands. The violence that informed and underpinned Europe and USA’s pedagogical drive to understand the world’s cultures remained implicit and covert.

World’s fairs and exhibitions would include laboratories where visitors could see or even take part in scientific research on racial features of various human population groups. Corbey finds that “anthropologists used to be represented on the committees heading the anthropological sections of world fairs, often quarreling with those who wished to cater more to commercial than to scientific or educational interests” (1993, 354). Parezo and Fowler (2007) examine the intricate relationship between anthropological research at US fairs and the promotion and advertising of both the nation state and the academic discipline. Sadiah Qureshi (2011) notes how museums of ethnography or colonial museums were often the direct offshoot of a world’s fair or exhibition. Some of the shows gained immense popularity in the academic community: for example, Buffalo Bill’s Wild West Show in US world fairs, which would feature Native Americans on display. Some of those exhibited also became popular amongst anthropologists, such as Saartjie Baartmann, the ‘Hottentot Venus’ who was put on show when alive and dissected when dead. A similar clinical and educational approach framed the display of Ota Benga, a Pygmy man, caged along with chimpanzees and orangutans (Putnam 2012).

In 2013, the term ‘human zoo’ was coined by Blanchard et al to encompass French expositions, the Swiss and German *Volkerschau*, British exhibitions featuring live human displays and freak shows. The term has remained in circulation ever since. It highlights the lasting significance of human displays in exhibitions in studies of empire, race and colonialism. I would argue, however, that with the exception of Priya Srinivasan’s groundbreaking discussion of the fate of *nautch* dancers in Coney Island (2012), dance history has paid little attention to the minefield of acts and performances that populated human exhibits. Second, attending to the narratives of dancers in colonial exhibitions opens up a violent relationship that dance shared with visual art and exhibition practices. This is a point that recent Euro-American conceptual experimentations with dance in museums and galleries never reference or acknowledge. Third, most of the literature outlined above privileges ocular experiences and histories over embodied or corporeal ones. This emphasis on spectacle and gaze, on the visual grammar of the display, undermines the bodily experiences, sensations and corporeal politics of those on display, rendering them as passive individuals lacking agency. As Munro suggests, historians have focused mainly on a top-down approach to studying colonial exhibitions, focusing on archival materials such as committee reports, newspaper accounts, catalogues and visual images, and revealing little about the experiences of those exhibited (2010, 84). Following Munro’s prompt, the discussion below applies a bottom-up approach to the history of human exhibits, focusing on a re-imagining of the corporeal experiences of *nautch* dancers in the Liberty’s exhibit of 1885 when faced with archival anomalies on these individuals.

**Please Don’t Touch: *nautch* in** **Liberty’s Exhibition of 1885**

In the winter of 1885, a group of ‘natives’ were shipped from India to London by Liberty’s, the luxury department store in London, to be installed as human exhibits in a ‘living Indian village’ at the Albert Palace in Battersea Park. Available visual records suggested that the exhibition arena was a lavish architectural show in itself, with newspapers highlighting the splendour of the site. *The Graphic* (1885, 591) reported:

The building is a handsome structure of glass and iron, and consists of a nave 60 feet high, 473 feet long, and 84 feet wide, with a gallery running round, and an apse at the centre of the nave, 50 feet long by 84 feet wide. There is also an annexe, known as the Connaught Hall, 60 feet high, 157 feet long, and a 118 feet wide, which has a double gallery all round, admirably adapted for musical entertainments.

**<**Figure 1

Caption: ‘Opening of the Albert Palace, Battersea.’ Image reproduced with the permission of Westminster City Archives and Liberty Ltd. >

As the image and the text in Figure 1 show, the 1885 exhibition followed the logic of grand Victorian exhibitions, established by the Great Exhibition of 1851, with the purpose of advertising trade, commerce and colonial power. The Liberty's exhibit was designed to promote and advertise the store and to hike up sales in the Oriental Antiques and Curios Department. The British weather, however, altered this plan. Day and night-time temperatures plummeted to a record low: it was the coldest winter in Britain in thirty years. As the historian Saloni Mathur (2000) noted, the exhibition was a disaster, financially as well as in terms of Indian and British relations. The bitter cold caused a break-down of hot water pipes at Albert Palace, causing freezing conditions for the Indians on show. The spectacle of ‘native’ authenticity failed as the Indians were given European winter-wear to fight off the cold, much to the disappointment of British spectators.  Moreover, the Indians who were shipped in to become live exhibits were deceived by their recruiting agent who ignored contractual obligations around suitable board, fees, accommodation and clothing.  The group turned to Nandalal Ghosh, a Cambridge-educated Bengali barrister living in London, who chaired a committee that began legal proceedings on their behalf. The case received wide publicity in Britain and in India, and a relief fund was set up in India to help raise funds for their return passage. By the time the Indians returned home, one had died, and the group had been starving for a week.

The failed Liberty’s exhibit has fittingly attracted attention from scholars such as Mathur for the backlash against colonial power that it exhibited and the impact of ‘popular, commercial, or “low” cultural practices on the history of anthropological production’ (2000, p. 516). A detailed archival search reveals the journalistic reporting of the event and other important details of the legal case led by Nandalal Ghosh (see Jensen 2018). The archives expose several fascinating details about this particular colonial exhibition (as discussed in the aforementioned studies by Mathur and Jensen), revealing a complex tapestry of ‘native’ bodies, colonial law, and anti-colonial agency from seemingly oppressed constituencies of people in Britain. Yet, if we attend closely to the dancers who were part of the Liberty’s exhibit and re-trace their movements, the picture becomes further complicated. I will open up, therefore, a different set of archival remains: those from a slim file housed in the Westminster City Archives, to suggest that by focusing on the dancing bodies, a more nuanced view of colonial history is afforded.

Most of the available primary records of the Liberty’s exhibit cited by Mathur (2000), mainly in the form of newspaper records, concur that among the ‘natives’ exhibited were two women, a pair of *nautch* dancers who had travelled with a group of forty Indian men.1 Mathur reported that these dancers were described as ‘“bewitching” objects of sexual curiosity’, and by quoting *The Indian Mirror* newspaper from 6 April 1886, highlighted how visitors to the exhibit tried to ‘ “touch the nautch girls... in doubt as to whether they are the real article”’ (2000, 503). The fact that the dancers were subjected to unsolicited physical touching by visitors to the living display at Battersea Park is not surprising. Most studies on human exhibits have found that despite clearly demarcated zones for spectator and those exhibited, regulations for contact between bodies were often breached. One of the first striking points about a newspaper article attributed to *Illustrated London News* in the Westminster City Archives file is the relegation of dance labour to non-work. The article announces:

The Indian village at the Albert Palace, Battersea, was opened on Saturday afternoon. It presents in a small space a variety of typical Hindoo industries, and is peopled by forty-five natives from different districts of India, of different castes and creeds. The natives are divided in to two classes – the entertainers and the workers. The former give performances illustrative of Hindoo juggling, dancing, and snake charming; the latter are employed in their respective trades. (*Illustrated London News*, Nov. 21, 1885a, 524)

This paragraph reveals the Victorian anthropological and taxonomic impulse to not only categorise people of colour, but also to place different values on their class of work. There is no hesitation here to curate the ‘different castes and creeds’ of India. The caste system was a matter of great curiosity, generating attitudes of superior moral indignation and marking out differences from Euro-Americans. On the other hand, the taxonomy of labour swiftly classifies the work of the Indians into the binary categories of ‘entertainers’ and ‘workers.’ Dancing, along with juggling and snake charming, is not considered work, and dancers are not ‘employed’ in a trade. A similar absenting of dance labour occurs in the captions of the visual document from the *Illustrated London News* (1885b, 527; see Figure 2).

<Figure 2

Caption: ‘Sketches at the Indian Village, Albert Palace, Battersea Park.’ Image reproduced with the permission of Westminster City Archives and Liberty Ltd. >

The dancer is at Number 2, labelled ‘Nautch dancing’. She is not given a profession or trade, and is not labelled a Nautch *dancer*, as the rest of her colleagues. She and the ‘Elementary Boy’ are stripped of any identity pertaining to trade or work. The second piece of information of note is a short paragraph in the same newspaper article on the dancers:

The entertainment provided by the jugglers and dancers attracted a large number of spectators, who were much interested in the exhibition of sleight-of-hand. The nautch dancers, of whom there are three, go through a series of graceful evolutions to the accompaniment of strange and monotonous music. Throughout the performance both dancers and jugglers keep up a continuous song or conversation in Hindustani, explanatory of the entertainment. The snake-charming forms an important part of the performances. (*Illustrated London News*, Nov. 21, 1885a, 524)

The article above suggests that there were three dancers, not two as found in the archival records consulted by Mathur (2000). Who was the third dancer? Is this an error in reporting, along with the fact that the first excerpt reports forty-five natives, instead of forty-two? The archival reportage on the dancers becomes further complicated when we learn, through Mathur (2000), that the pair of *nautch* dancers was a mother and daughter duo. The pithy file at Westminster City Archives tells a different story. In a document (see Figure 3) titled ‘List of Indian Natives’, forty-five ‘natives’ are listed, and three people are named as dancers: Dancing Boy Sheik Ameer Sheik Mohideen from Delhi (age 14), Dancing Girl Sahina Jayabanoo from Delhi (age 16) and Dancing Girl Sheeta Thayi from ‘Carnatic’ (age 20).

<Figure 3

Caption: ‘List of Indian Natives.’ Image reproduced with the permission of Westminster City Archives and Liberty Ltd.>

This document is significant for manifold reasons. First, it reveals discrepancies and inconsistencies in the archives relating to those exhibited in colonial displays. Second, the list includes a 9-year old boy, Bala Balaya, the ‘Elementary Boy’ here listed as ‘Tum Tum Chokra’, showing that for exhibit curators such Mr. A. Bonner and Sir Frank Sonbar of Bombay (named at the bottom of the document), child labour was not an issue. Third, attending to the entries for the dancers reveals the chaotic and haphazard way in which dances were curated and presented for the spectacles at the exhibition. Not only were the two women dancers not a mother and daughter, they also came from opposite sides of India: Sahina from Delhi, and Sheeta from the vaguely labelled ‘Carnatic’ region, probably meaning from South India. The two dancers would have hailed from very different movement traditions: a close inspection of the image in Figure 2, especially the garments that the dancers seem to be wearing, suggests that Sahina trained in a north Indian dance form (she is wearing a *churidar*, a long skirt, a blouse and a veil), whereas Sheeta, seated and playing a musical instrument, seems to be wearing a *sari*. Sheik Ameer Sheik Mohideen, the Dancing Boy, has left no visual trace of his dancing. The reportage of the performance from the extract above suggests that snake charming was an ‘important part of the performances.’ Not only were the live *nautch* performances a complete mish-mash of north and south Indian movement idioms, they also collapsed animal and human performances. The dancers apparently kept up a conversation in Hindustani while dancing. What was this ‘Hindustani’ language, spoken by a Carnatic dancer and two performers from Delhi, hailing from different linguistic territories? The spectators who thronged the exhibitions were desperate for an ‘authentic’ taste of the exotic. Instead, they were served a chaotic and disorderly South Asian aesthetic in the name of authenticity. On the other hand, the chaotic framework of the performance may have allowed for new forms of creativity as dancers adapted to each other’s movement vocabularies through improvisation, and thus brought about new hybrid dance aesthetics.

The layered up bodies of the *nautch* dancers were a visual oddity for spectators and of no value to anthropologists. These dancing bodies disrupted both the scopophilic gaze that attempted to consume them, and the violent anthropological/pedagogic/taxonomic drive that may have wanted to study and visually dissect them. The corporeality of the dancers butted against the ocular hegemony of the exhibition.

**‘Dance Remains’: reenactments and historical fictions**

Confronted with archival fake news, inconsistencies, and the failure of textual and visual records in adequately capturing the lived experiences of the dancers in Liberty’s exhibit, I ask: in what ways can a creative, performative and corporeal engagement with the archives, with history, offer a valuable methodology for research? From the nearly vanished remains of dancing bodies in the colonial archive, what form could a re-imagining of *nautch* dancers, their dancing and their histories take? To attempt a reconstruction, to give Sahina, Sheeta and Sheik Ameer a ‘true voice’ to speak back to history seems to be a fair way forward but Spivak whispers that I, the privileged academic and ‘native informant’ would then be ventriloquizing for the subaltern (1993, 79). I therefore turn to performance reenactments in order to seek a viable methodology to make sense of a violent colonial history. The performance studies scholar, Rebecca Schneider wrote a seminal essay, ‘Performance Remains’, probing the ephemeral nature of performance within the logic of the archive, according to which performance is ‘that which does not remain’ (2001, 100). Schneider argues against this tendency of the archive to make performance vanish, suggesting that archives themselves perform the institution of disappearance. Schneider writes:

When we approach performance not as that which disappears (as the archive expects), but as both the act of remaining and a means of reappearance (though not a metaphysics of presence) we almost immediately are forced to admit that remains do not have to be isolated to the document, to the object, to bone versus flesh (2001, 103).

Schneider warns that we should not treat ‘performative remains as a metaphysic of presence that privileges an original or singular authenticity’ (ibid, 104). She suggests that ‘it is not *presence* that appears in performance but precisely the missed encounter - the reverberations of the overlooked, the missed, the repressed, the seemingly forgotten’ (ibid, emphasis in original). This rejection of authentic pasts in reenactments is also echoed in contemporary dance reenactments, and in scholarship on such reenactments. Andre Lepecki proposes that a choreographic ‘will to archive’ in current dance reenactments gives dancers ‘the capacity to identify in a past work still non-exhausted creative fields of “impalpable possibilities”” (2010, 31). In re-enacting dances, Lepecki suggests, ‘we turn back, and in this return we find in past dances a will to keep inventing’ (ibid, 46). A concern with the ‘economies of authorship’ (ibid) also appears in Ramsay Burt’s essay on dance reenactments, which highlights the political potential of an active rather than a ‘reactive use of history’ (2003, 37), exploring how contemporary dances butt against the imposed hegemony of codified dance vocabularies and techniques as methods of regulating bodies. He suggests that in dance work where the use of historical citations emphasizes the present experience of the performer and her relationship to the past, it is possible to ‘short-circuit the power relations through which dancing bodies are disciplined and controlled’ (ibid, 41). In such reenactments, ‘history is no longer seen as a source of transcendent, aesthetic values’ (ibid) and the spectators, through partial access to memory acts, engage in a new relationship with the past.

In Mark Franko’s recently edited volume of essays on dance and reenactment (2017), the increasing significance of reenactment as a methodology in dance studies is made clear. Franko carefully delineates the difference between reconstruction as a ‘method of recovery’ and reenactment as a ‘dramaturgy of presentation’ (2017, 8), highlighting, like Schneider (2001) the rejection of authenticity within the reenactment process. Discussing reenactment as a methodology, Franko suggests:

In reversing the ideological premises of reconstruction while conserving its methodology, re-enactive dancers have taken the representation of the past into their own hands, and accordingly have transformed it. This appropriation of the historical function can be interpreted in a number of ways: (1) as the “right of return” to earlier work; (2) the use of performance as a historiographical medium with discursive dimension; and (3) self-staging as an contemporary agent in confrontation with this project, hence a wilful theatricalization of the entire situation (2017, 11).

In attempting to re-narrate creatively the history of the *nautch* dancers in the Liberty’s exhibit, I could see myself, a historian-dancer, as agreeing to the features outlined above: exercising my ‘right to return’ to the past; using my own dance as a historiographical medium with a discursive element; and staging my own self in confrontation with the historiographical project. I could not agree more with Franko that ‘[i]n many ways, reenactments tell us the past is not over: the past is unfinished business’ (2017, 7). Yet, Bret Bailey did all the above in *Exhibit B*, a reenactment which, according to Chikha and Arnaut engaged mostly white bourgeois audiences, in ‘bourgeois ventriloquism’ (2013, 679), which failed disastrously in London, a city with politically conscious diasporic constituencies. I would argue that there are ideological underpinnings within current contemporary Euro-American dance reenactments, which fail certain kinds of archival traces, certain violent histories, and certain types of dance remains. Most of the Euro-American dance reenactments are overwhelmingly concerned with the politics of authorship, as noted by Lepecki (2010) and Burt (2003). The choreographers involved in many of the reenactments discussed in Franko’s volume remain tethered to a mostly white, self-referential history. Most, if not all of the reenactments, rely methodologically on the idea of notations or other written records of dance, on the presence of recoverable materials, as Anna Pakes points out (2017). Neither authorship as a conceptual drive nor notation as a methodological tool can help us re-imagine the *nautch*. So I picked up the threads of Pakes’s wonderful but tentative proposal. While my re-imagining of the Liberty *nautch* dancers has very little in common with the three dance works Pakes cites as examples of historical fictions (Fabian Barba’s *A Mary Wigman Dance* Evening, 2009; Philippe Decouffle’s *Panorama*, 2012; and Kirov Ballet’s *Sleeping Beauty*, 1999), the idea that the function of these fictions ‘is to test how things might have been without necessarily committing to the claim that this is how they were’ (2017, 98) is appealing. So I ask, for my project of reimagining the lived experiences of the *nautch* dancers: how does historical fiction as a corporeal methodology enable a more ethical recovery of subaltern voices muffled by the colonial archive?

When I first encountered the history of Liberty’s human exhibit through Mathur’s (2000) essay, I was struck by a gap in the historical narrative, between the written text and the visual archive. Mathur wonderfully captured the bitterly cold winter of London in 1885, when the human exhibit opened. This icy history crept inside me and began to settle as I began to wonder about the displayed Indians, shivering and trembling, their breath freezing. In sub-zero conditions, the motley group of South Asians, in their cotton *dhotis*, *kurtas*, *churidars* and *saris*, still managed to find a voice – they complained about a lack of adequate clothing, and were given winter clothes. Instead of the warm brown skin of exotic bodies, spectators witnessed the ‘natives’ covered in layers of European woollens and left the exhibit disappointed. There was no spectacle of coloured human flesh for the voyeuristic white gaze.

The visual records however, do not tell the story of the cold. In the image reproduced in Figure 2, and on the pages of the *Illustrated London News*, the ‘natives’ are all sketched as wearing their usual attire, without any signs of winter wear. Was this a lie, a bit of ‘fake news’, to rope in audiences through false publicity? Or was the sketch made once the displayed Indians were asked to remove their warm clothing to pose for the sketching artist, despite the cold? I kept thinking of the dancers. What would they have looked like in a woollen coat, hat, gloves and scarf and shoes, layered on top of their Indian clothes? How did they move, pirouette, gesture, with the weight of the garments, the burden of empire? To understand their bodily, kinaesthetic experience, I decided to corporealize history. I wore a long skirt, a blouse, a *dupatta* as a veil, and on top of these I wore a long coat, hat, gloves, scarf and shoes. I tried to dance. I moved awkwardly, clumsily, unable to pirouette at speed, to traverse space fluidly. My hand gestures were muffled by the gloves. My neck and head movements were buried under the hat. My footwork vanished under the cover of shoes.

Theirs was a clumsy, awkward dance. A dance muffled, buried, vanished in the cold, in the archives. Yet, I had to return this awkward and clumsy dance to the pages of history. I wrote a keynote on the *nautch* dancers in the Liberty’s exhibit for the ‘Dance in the Age of Forgetfulness’ conference organised by the Society of Dance Research in 2018, and I performed my reenactment. I walked on to the performance space wearing layers of clothing, European woollens on top of layers of mismatched Indian articles, carrying a suitcase. I tried to briefly reenact the frozen moment of dancing in Figure 2, turning slowly while holding the veil, and then abandoned the pirouette, the gesture. As my performance lecture progressed, I began to take off the articles of clothing. I bit one glove with my teeth, pulled it out of my hands and spat it. I shook off the other glove. I flung my hat at the audience, threw my coat and cast off my *dupatta*. I undid my blouse, unhooked my skirt. By the end of my lecture, the space was strewn with overthrown clothes. I gathered these strewn garments, packed them in the suitcase and wheeled it away, leaving an empty space. When I re-performed the lecture at the opening plenary of the Dance Studies Association annual conference in 2018, I added another layer. I imagined what the dancers would have muttered under their breath when their buttocks were groped or their breasts pinched by spectators of the Liberty’s display. I wrote a fiction in which the *nautch* dancers swore back. Along with my dance colleagues Melissa Blanco Borelli and Ann Cooper Albright, I performed a choreography of choral swearing, in which the filthiest of expletives were uttered, echoed, and repeated loudly.

In the absence of notations, reliable visual records or other forms of documentation, a reenactment of the material conditions in which the Liberty *nautch* dancers may have moved was a useful starting point to imagining their corporeality. However, the limits of reenactment as a methodology in this context lay mainly in the impossibility of returning to a violent history without repeating or reifying its violence. Hence, in my own corporeal engagement with the *nautch* dancer’s history, only one gesture – that of holding the veil and turning slowly – is attempted and then it is abandoned. The rest of the movement mainly arises from the fictional overthrowing of garments. It is historical fiction which affords a new set of corporeal acts – flinging, shaking and straining take the place of any plausible or recognisable South Asian movements that might lend an air of ‘authenticity’ to the reimagined colonial past. The lack of any written historical materials on movement leads to the potential for subverting representations of the exotic oriental dancer.

**A Letter to Liberty’s *Nautch* Dancers**

Dear Sahina, Sheeta and Sheik Ameer: yours is a dance I can never claim to reenact. I cannot. Yours is voice I can never claim to recover. I need not. You had a voice and you used it. But in fictionalising your history, I have in my body felt the tiniest fraction of the enormous weight and burden of empire that you did. I have overthrown, cast off and shed that burden, as you managed to do, even if partially. I swore back, as you may or may not have. I took some liberties. I appropriated your history by performing your story. But I also bit, pulled, spat at, shook off, flung, threw, cast off, undid and unhooked the part written for you by the archive. Dancing is a doing, and my dance allowed me to do this. And I hope that your traces have allowed me, in an anarchic way perhaps, to decolonize the archive.

**Notes**

1.It is important to examine briefly here the multiplicity of meanings that the term ‘*nautch*’ evoked for people in South Asia and for those in Europe. As Rosie Jensen (2018) suggests, one meaning pointed to the dramatized and fictional character of an exotic South Asian dancer, which was popularised on the European stage through ballets such as *La Bayadère* (1877) and productions such as *The Nautch Girl* (1891). These were played by white performers. The other versions of *nautch* were the real South Asian dancers who Euro-Americans encountered in India, or who travelled to Europe and North America from India. The term *nautch* is an anglicised version of the word ‘*naach*’, which translates simply as ‘dance’. It was an umbrella term used by Europeans to collapse a range of different practices of dance from across the South Asian sub-continent. The *nautch* body, along with the bodies of *devadasis* (temple dancers) became the centre of fierce debates on South Asian dancing women’s sexual promiscuity, public sexual health, property and inheritance rights for women, etc. under colonial rule. Simultaneously attractive and fearsome, beautiful and dangerous, skilled but disreputable - the *nautch* embodied ambivalent attitudes to the idea of Indian exotic femininity. An anti-*nautch* campaign was launched by British Christian missionaries and urban Indians, including nationalists and professionals, in 1892, a few years after *nautch* dancers were brought over for the Liberty’s exhibit. It ultimately led to the suppression of the *devadasi* (temple dancer) system in India. See Pallabi Chakravorty (2008) for a more detailed discussion of *nautch*.

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