The Revolution Will Not Be Exhibited

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"It is no secret that millions of objects, never destined for display in museal white walls, have been looted from all over the world by different imperial agents. It is no secret that many of them have been carefully handled, preserved and displayed to this day in Western museums as precious art objects. At the same time, it is no secret that millions of people, stripped bare of most of their material world, including tools, ornaments and other artifacts, continue to seek a place where they can be at home again and rebuild a habitable world. These two seemingly unrelated movements of forced migration of people and artifacts, as well as their separation, are as old as the invention of the "new world." (Azoulay, n.d., 1)

Early in the film from the Marvel Cinematic Universe, *Black Panther* (Coogler, 2018), Erik Killmonger Stevens (Michael B. Jordan) stands before a glass case of African artifacts at the "Museum of Great Britain," a thinly-disguised stand-in for the brick and mortar British Museum in London. In the scene, Killmonger informs the museum director of his intention to take back the artifacts. The puzzled director reminds him that the items are not for sale. Killmonger counters, "How do you think your ancestors got these? Do you think they paid a fair price? Or did they take it… like they took everything else?" The film and this scene draw our attention to, among other things, the theft of Benin Bronzes by British soldiers in 1897. It attempts to make visible how these museum holdings were transported in the hold of ships that had previously carried enslaved peoples, profiting from their bodies for centuries.

Colonial theft transformed the wealth of colonial powers, and the afterlives of colonialism continue to negatively affect countries often referred to as "post-colonial." According to a recent estimate, Britian stole a staggering $45 trillion from the Indian subcontinent between 1765 and 1938 alone. The British Museum opened its doors in 1759 and continues to display its spoils from various parts of the world. As an institution it receives tourists from all over the world — in 2024, over 6.5 million visitors came, breaking previous records. More than a site of breezy tourism, the museum exists as an ongoing site of exhibition, education, contestation, appropriation and theft.

In this essay, I try to understand what it means to stage an Indian classical dance performance at the British Museum and what is at stake. More specifically I query, what does it mean to sacralize stolen objects with immigrant bodies dancing dances from colonized lands. *Apotheosis*, a carefully-choreographed staging by several Indian neo-classical dancers, was performed in the storied museum's Sir Joseph Hotung Gallery of China and South Asia, in 2019. The performance's title which means "divinification," is the elevation of a person to the rank of a god or divine being, or, the ultimate expression or epitome of a divine quality. The question I ask is if and how this artistic performance, in this space, intervenes in or uncritically extends the well-established depravations of colonial plundering.

The video of the performance opens with a Bharatnatyam dance in front of a large Chola bronze Nataraja from 1100 A.D. Surrounded by deities, sculptures and artifacts from two of the most populous countries in the world, China and India, the virtuosic dancers perform four (of eight) Indian neo-classical forms— bharatnatyam, odissi, kuchipudi and kathak— to an appreciative crowd watching behind velvet ropes. The video alternates between the dancers in the crowded gallery and shots of

them performing to and around the sculptures with no people. This choice directs our viewing attention toward the presence and absence of audiences, witnesses to events both current and historical.

The filmed version premiered online during the pandemic in 2021 as a celebration of South Asia Heritage month in the UK. The almost 30-minute video is still available at the British Museum Events YouTube page and currently has almost 4.5 million views. Part of the description beneath the online video reads, *"Devised in response to the Museum's South Asia collection, it brought the objects to life and charged them with the life-force they were created to hold"* (italics mine). But precisely what response had been "devised" and what manner of "life-force" was transmuted into the long-displaced objects? Do the classical dancers provide the context or cultural "charge" from which the artifacts were formerly ripped, or do they simply reify their carceral status in the museum's galleries/galleys?

In an introduction to a special issue on *Dance and the Museum*, Franko and Lepecki ask, "What role might dance be fulfilling 'in the museum's ruins'" (Crimp 1995), as it operates through its crevices, cracks, and usually dormant spaces, to offer a spectacle of the living, and to bring live performance back to these ruins, after the strong institutional critique the museum had suffered throughout the late 1960s and the 1970s? Does dance serve what Tony Bennett (1995) has called the museum's "exhibitionary complex"? (Franko and Lepecki 2014, 2) Such questions are crucial but need to be answered anew within the colonial and contemporary context. These neo-classical dance forms suffered violences and critiques of concubinage and vulgarity by Victorian morality enmeshed in colonial power, and were policed, starved and eliminated. Post-independence in 1947, and reinvented for the proscenium stage in the 20th century, these dance forms found new audiences and a reanimated resilience. What better way to counter the rising critique of stolen goods and to ensure that they stay within the walls of the British museum than to "open" it to dancing immigrant bodies, nurtured by immigrant organizations dancing dance forms vilified and destroyed by colonialism?

It might seem that the museum has taken up Ariella Aisha Azoulay's challenge, cited at the beginning, by placing dancing bodies, many who are the living consequences of forced displacements and migrations, into a conversation with stolen goods. But museums, like universities, are subject to the same logics of colonialism, imperialism and capitalism, and although aesthetically, it may be a successful endeavor of feminine-presenting, virtuosic dancers who share their craft for a few hours, *Apotheosis* masks violent colonial histories. We must ask how does the acquisition of moving bodies—not only in a one-off performance to a live audience but in its video afterlife—provide tacit permission for other kinds of theft? Unlike Killmonger in *Black Panther*, the dancers do not leave with any of these artifacts, suggesting, as it might, a hope for a long-deferred justice or repatriation of objects. More to the point, they become artifacts themselves, joining the deep and complicated catalog of colonial piracy. To dance neoclassical dance forms amid stolen objects is to dance a complicity in the museum's perpetual colonial mission.

Akademi, the presenting company, is an institution based in the UK which has been dedicated to the study of South Asian Dance forms since 1979. They have navigated what it means to sustain these immigrant dance forms, teach and build communities around them, and function within the economy of South Asian dance in the west, jockeying mightily for funding, space, time and an audience. The bodies of the dancers in the museum belie the labour, training, injury, and the fragility of dance-

making (Srinivasan 2011). Yet art, specifically dance and film can do the work of being able to show us the horrors of colonialism. For example, Mati Diop, in her unique hybrid of fiction and documentary *Dahomey* (Diop, 2024) addresses this very issue of the complexities of colonial loot. Between 1872-1960, French colonizers took artefacts from Benin, formerly known as the Kingdom of Dahomey in West Africa. After an extensive campaign for repatriation, 26 items were approved for return from the Musée du quai Branly in Paris. The film anthropomorphizes object "Number 26" whose disembodied voice leads us through much of the film as they long for a return to their homeland. We hear (in Fon) "There are thousands of us in this night. Uprooted. Ripped out. The spoils of massive plundering. What awaits me elsewhere?" The journey of 26 objects is followed by a nuanced discussion with students at Université d' Abomey-Calavi about cultural theft and repatriation. It is a powerful film with the youth of Benin who model how to have these conversations and what is at stake.

In Fall 2022, I taught a semester abroad in London, offering a class titled *The Empire Strikes Back* (inspired by Stuart Hall's 1982 essay). I included a visit to the Tower of London to see the Crown Jewels. Among them is the famed Kohinoor, perhaps the most well-known of colonial treasures. When the students emerged from the exhibit, I asked them what they thought and a Pakistani student smiled wryly and said, "chori ka maal" (the stuff of theft). While our class centered around these issues and the ongoing resistance to empire, many of these responses do not always come readily from students in the West. Instead, colonialism and the material artifacts of colonialism—be they bronzes or classical Indian dance—are commodified, packaged for uncritical consumption by millions, yet again.

No doubt the performances at the British Museum were/are transformative for some. They created an opening, a breath, a possibility to learn even as the dancing bodies danced in the hold of the museum. M. Jacqui Alexander's *Pedagogies of Crossing*, the collection of essays that inspire this issue, intervenes in such spaces of knowledge production, especially those that are "imprisoned within modernity's secularized episteme"(Alexander 2005, 8). Alexander urges us to destabilize our current ways of knowing and engage in "the urgent task of configuring new ways of being and knowing and to plot the different metaphysics that are needed to move away from living alterity premised in difference to living intersubjectivity premised in relationality and solidarity"(Alexander 2005, 8–9). To take up her challenge, in the museum and beyond, what would such possibilities of living look like?

A productive response to this challenge might begin with a simple inclusion of a multiplicity of informed voices. The student at the Tower of London, for example, was able to cut to the heart of the matter not through a training in museum studies, but via the hard-won personal knowledge of someone from a conquered land. What if that voice were allowed the same level of platform exposure as the copy promoting the video? What if the voice of a museum professional from a plundered country who has been striving to convince brutish museums to return the objects they display were paired alongside the West's proclaimed nobility of purpose in protecting the world's treasures from risk and depravation? What if we asked the dancers themselves to speak to the complexity inherent in their positionality, as well as their devotional and artistic practice as it intersects with the fraught spaces of colonial exhibitionisms? Might such simple insistences be just one beginning to "rebuild a more habitable world"(Azoulay, n.d.) for all?

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