Decolonisation, we know, is an historical process: in other words, it can only be understood, it can only find its significance and become self coherent insofar as we can discern the history-making movement which gives it form and substance … Decolonisation, therefore, implies the urgent need to thoroughly chal-
lenge the colonial situation. (Fanon 2004: 2)

While conducting fieldwork for my research on In-
dian classical dance performances in the context of British multiculturalism, I attended an event that proved to be an uncanny experience. The Alchemy Festival, a major occasion for many of the dancers with whom I worked, was an annual South Asian arts festival held at the Southbank Centre in London. This mainstream and celebrated arts venue attracts a wide spectrum of audiences to its various performances and cultural activities, lending the event an added aura of prestige. Bringing together ‘indigenous’, diasporic and multicultural subjects in one space, Alchemy has over the years helped to construct very definite notions of ‘Indianness’ and ‘Britishness’ in its celebra-
tion of South Asian arts.¹

Notably, the Alchemy Festival appears to have in-
creased in size and scope every year during my period of attendance (2009–2012), attesting to its attraction as a landmark arts event in this vibrant and multiracial city. This growth was most evident to me during my final year of attendance, for that year the lobby of the Southbank had been transformed into a real life ex-
hibit of ‘India’, featuring most specifically its people, customs and artisanal products. ‘Native’ men in Ra-
jesthani turbans and dress played various instruments while an elderly woman dressed in a simple cotton sari sat opposite them, occupying herself with her work on a spinning wheel. Various Indian handicrafts and products were similarly on display, with some of these available for sale to the British audience in at-
tendance. Behind this exhibition was the stage upon
which various dancers and musicians – from India and the U.K. – were to perform. Colourful saris were draped across the lobby to enhance a feeling of ‘Indian-ness’ inside the venue, and many of the Festival attendees were enjoying the various Indian snacks that were being sold in the stalls outside.

As I entered the lobby, I suddenly felt as if I had been transported to Dilli Haat, the open-air arts and crafts market in Delhi where artisans from across India come to sell their regional artefacts. Located in the Indian capital, Dilli Haat similarly presents ‘cultural’ performances – from music to puppetry to artisans making their goods – to the many tourists, and middle-class urban Indians, who come to visit the market and shop. This is a market in which all of India can be experienced (consumed) in one setting, a phenomenon that was now being eerily staged in the lobby of London’s Southbank Centre.

However, this was not the only uncanny experience I had at Alchemy in that moment of cultural perusal. Indeed, walking around the lobby, observing the musicians and artisans – none of whom looked back at those of us who had come to view them – I was struck by the extent to which this occasion echoed an event with a much longer and explicitly colonial history – the World Exhibitions and Fairs of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Of the 1889 Paris Exhibition, Mitchell (2000: 294) notes how ‘[t]he world exhibitions of the second half of the [nineteenth] century offered the visitor exactly this educational encounter, with natives and their artifacts arranged to provide the direct experience of a colonized object-world’. These exhibitions created a paradox whereby the Europeans in attendance sought to establish the ‘objectness’ of the Orient, which required their own presence to be rendered invisible on the one hand, while simultaneously desiring to experience and thus become a part of this ‘object-world’, as if it were real on the other (ibid.: 307). The World Exhibition, creating the phantasm of Orientalism, thus existed in the liminal space between representation and reality (see also Çelik and Kinney 2008). Indeed it was at such an exhibition that the famous dancer Ruth St. Denis – later credited with restoring prestige to dance in India – found the inspiration to create her version of ‘Indian’ dance (Srinivasan 2011: 75; Allen 1997: 86–88).

Attending the Alchemy Festival in London was thus not only to be ‘transported to India’ in the present, it was also to be transported to the colonial imagery of India represented by the World Exhibitions of the past. As Dirks (2000) has noted, representations such as those performed at these exhibitions were inseparable from the colonial project that was simultaneously premised on conquest and the acquisition of knowledge; ‘[b]rute torture on the body of the colonised was not the same as the public exhibition of a colonised body, but these two moments of colonial power shared in more than they differed’ (ibid.: 5). Reitered in the present, what did the exhibition of these ‘indigenous’ bodies, these producers of material goods that could be purchased by the multicultural consumers in attendance, mean in the context of post-colonial, transnational and multicultural global relations? How different is the contemporary context from these iconic examples of nineteenth-century colonial spectacles? Held at the Southbank Centre, the Alchemy Festival represents a diasporic success in the multicultural context for, through it, diasporic subjects could claim to be accepted and desired by – and therefore established in – mainstream British society (represented, for example, by the venue). The success of the exhibition at the Southbank Centre suggests a complex articulation of the history and relations of power that have made the London Festival possible; staged by Indian and diasporic organisers and performers, the Alchemy Festival, I argue, brought full circle the colonial history of and ongoing investment in such cultural representation.²

Towards a Postcolonial Ethnography

Studying the Alchemy Festival leads me to make a case for a methodology that historicises transnational cultural constructions and representations to excavate the colonial power relations that shape them. Such a methodology requires us to ask what it means to pay attention to the ‘felt’ experience of the similarities between, for example, the Alchemy Festival in London, contemporary India (Dilli Haat) and the colonial exhibition simultaneously. Moreover, what does such an excavation reveal about our understanding of cultural practices and performances in the context of postcolonial cultural production, diaspora, multiculturalism and transnationalism – all of which affect and are affected by contemporary performances of Indian classical dance,³ for example? An analysis of the relation of coloniality to transnationality, I argue, is thus crucial for a methodology that seeks to make sense of this relationship.

The relation of Indian classical dance to coloniality – a term that includes the discourses of both coloniser and colonised – poses an important question for an anthropological investigation such as mine: how does contemporary artistic and cultural production rely upon and produce once more the discourses of colo-
nality by which they were shaped? As I found in my research, to approach Indian classical dance performances in the present is to encounter the production of particular historical narratives, racialised constructions of cultural difference, gendered ideals and notions of religious national belonging – in short, tropes that can be traced back to the colonial encounter and nationalist discourses (Thobani 2013). By introducing two of these tropes in the following sections of this article – the construction of a temporal evolutionary schema for Indian classical and Contemporary South Asian dance⁴ and, secondly, femininity and discourses of desire – I demonstrate how an ethnographic approach can deepen our understanding of the relationship between the colonial past and the transnational/multicultural present, represented by the U.K. as a research site.

My larger research from which this article draws is based on two years of ethnographic fieldwork in and around the city of London, during which time I conducted participant observation as an Indian classical dancer; conducted over fifty interviews with dance performers, teachers, producers and enthusiasts; observed a variety of Indian classical and Contemporary South Asian dance performances; and analysed promotional materials and other media coverage. This research led me to identify four tropes as central to dancers’ definitions of Indian classical dance as mentioned above: ancient historical narrative, racialised cultural identity, idealised femininity and religious national belonging. My pursuit of a postcolonial ethnographic project entails historicising these tropes to understand their colonial histories, as well as the ways in which they are produced by the very dancers who rely upon them in defining their dance practices.

While much of postcolonial studies has drawn from literary studies to trace the reproduction of colonial discourse (Said 1993; Spivak 1999), the focus on contemporary practices that ethnography enables can bring to the surface the ways in which such discourses are lived in the present everyday. Indeed, it is this very lived quality that gives these discourses their longevity. Centring this historicity in my ethnographic study, I aim to push the limits of ethnography to understand the historical and social politics that make practices such as Indian classical dance possible in the present. That is, my objective is to understand from where the meaning attributed to these practices are derived and how the relations of power they sustain are reproduced. Given that the genealogy of anthropology reveals its close ties to the colonial encounter (Asad 1973; see also Thomas 1994), the question that requires attention is what a postcolonial ethnography might look like. Historicising and highlighting the postcolonial reproduction of Indian classical dance – therefore refusing to take its existence as sui generis – I draw attention to the relationship between the contemporary moment and coloniality, as well as the latter’s ongoing power to reconstitute itself in the present. I now turn to two ethnographic examples to demonstrate this methodology in practice.

The Temporality of Classical Dance

Now contained under the rubric ‘classical’, forms of Indian classical dance such as Bharatanatyam, Kathak and Odissi underwent significant (re)construction during the heyday of the twentieth-century nationalist movement that was reliant upon the creation of a coherent cultural and national identity in its struggle against British rule in India (Soneji 2012; Srinivasan 2011). These reconstructive movements disconnected the ‘tradition’ of dance from its hereditary performers – namely the female temple and court dancers, now seen to have fallen into disrepute – to sanitise it as a ‘classical’ artistic heritage (Meduri 1996; Srinivasan 1985; Walker 2010). Such ‘restoration’ of prestige to a denigrated practice offered a cultural counterpoint to salve elite nationalist anxieties regarding the purity of the nation and its identity; reclaiming dance traditions supposedly rooted in a 2,000-year-old history offered one site for the expression of an unadulterated Indian culture that predated colonisation, while redeeming the dance’s ‘essence’ and presenting it as high art served to disprove normative claims regarding Indian incivility.⁵ It is this reconstructed and sanitised form of dance that is now celebrated in various depictions of Indian culture in a myriad of contexts, in India and abroad; it is also this form that is projected back onto history to present the dance as constituting a tradition originating in the mists of time (for an example of this discourse, see Kothari and Pasricha 1990).

While this narrative of antiquity remains largely unquestioned by Indian classical dancers despite their awareness of the recentness of the reconstruction of the dance, it nonetheless produces challenges for dancers in the U.K. to be seen as innovative and creative given the historical and cultural stasis this origin narrative implies. If sceptical of the antiquity associated with Indian classical dance – or wanting to be regarded as innovative and professional artists in their field – dancers tend to focus on the form itself to circumvent these constricting conundrums. That is to say, those dancers who question or are hesitant to re-
produce these colonial/historical constructions overwhelmingly choose simply to sidestep the problem by emphasising the embodied form of the dance itself. Dancers who take this approach argue that the form is capable of ‘speaking for itself’ through the movements that make it distinctive. These dancers are also more likely to engage in the emergent form of Contemporary South Asian dance, identified as a distinctly British (albeit British South Asian) form.

For many of the soloists currently engaged in the project to contemporise their dance and make careers as British South Asian dancers, some training in Western Contemporary dance has become part of their repertoire. These dancers are able to draw on the cultural capital this allows them to create new works, which are most often performed at prominent London venues associated with the mainstream (and not just South Asian) art world, such as The Place and Saddler’s Wells. Performing at these venues and being included in their festival line-ups invests these dancers with a particular prestige and confirms their professionalism. These dancers often contrast such ‘professional’ performances with their ‘community’ counterparts, sometimes in disparaging ways. The latter encapsulate classical performances presented to mostly South Asian audiences, often in tandem with religious celebrations, national holidays and other community events; in contrast the professional designation is most often reserved for performances of Contemporary South Asian dance, more likely to take place in venues within the city centre and draw mixed or predominately white audiences with an interest in dance despite a lack of familiarity with Indian classical/South Asian dance specifically. The community/professional distinction parallels that between Indian classical and Contemporary South Asian dance performances, aligning the binary distinction of tradition and modernity with that of amateurism and professionalism.

While the community–professional distinction may manifest in other arenas, including other forms of dance, music and sport, its articulation in relation to Indian classical and Contemporary South Asian dance is distinguished by the double meaning of ‘community’. In the case of South Asian dance, this ‘community’ is more closely aligned with the ‘community’ of multicultural discourse; that is, it has connotations of ethnicity, religion and migration. This is evidenced by the fact that ‘professional’ dancers (i.e. Contemporary South Asian) can do ‘community work’ in the mainstream sense (i.e. offer workshops in London schools), but this does not make them ‘community dancers’. In fact, that professional dancers work with mainstream communities (and not the South Asian community) can lend them further credibility as professionals. Moreover, the colonial and postcolonial construction of ‘community’ as a way of signifying cultural difference (see Banks 1992: 4; Baumann 1996: 28; Chatterjee 1999: 234–5) is equally relevant to this construction; the colonial history of the construction of ‘community’ makes possible its presentday inscription as ‘ethnic’ within multiculturalist discourse.

Although Indian classical and Contemporary South Asian dance are considered to be distinct genres – with the former seen to draw on the culture, mythology and traditions of the ‘homeland’ and the latter to reflect the hybridity and cosmopolitanism of modern Britain – the two are nonetheless mutually constitutive. One of the key arguments in my larger work addresses the temporality of the relationship between Indian classical and Contemporary South Asian dance such that this relation reifies notions of (Indian) tradition and (British) modernity. As I demonstrate elsewhere (Thobani 2013), this relationship is also racialised in a manner that produces Indian classical dance as not only irredeemably ancient, but overly cultural as well.

Apparent in this relationship then are the ways in which the distinction between Indian classical and Contemporary South Asian dance aligns with the production of ‘Indian’ and ‘British’ identities; while Indian classical dance is associated with constructions of the Indian nation – through discourses of culture, tradition femininity and religion – Contemporary South Asian dance contributes to the production of the British nation as modern, cosmopolitan and celebratory of hybridity. Importantly, both genres contribute to the construction of British multiculturalism for, despite its deep connection to Indian nationhood, the essentialisation of Indian classical dance in contrast with Contemporary South Asian dance helps support definitions of British identity as multicultural and simultaneously national, as demonstrated at the Alchemy Festival.

Despite the desire of Contemporary South Asian dancers – as well as the professional arts agencies that support them – to move away from the discursive constrictions associated with Indian classical dance, they cannot help but re-produce Indian classical dance (and culture) as culturally and temporally stagnant in their very attempt to transcend this supposed stasis. While this attempt represents one form of critique forwarded by the development of Contemporary South Asian dance – a critique that is expanded to include other examples of cultural essentialism in the multiculturalist paradigm – it nevertheless undermines a fuller appreciation of the binary logic of tradition and
modernity. Contemporary South Asian dancers may seek to interrogate essentialised subjectivity and identity politics in the context of multicultural dialogue and racial antagonism in the U.K. – approaches that are regarded as inherently ‘modern’ – but they can only do so by essentialising Indian culture by contrasting it to their (contemporary South Asian) British subjectivities yet again. Despite their best intentions, the discourses of contemporaneity within which these dancers and agencies operate reifies Indian culture (Indian classical dance) as static once more.

For example, while performances of this kind that I observed included a variety of dancers from different (cultural and artistic) backgrounds, as well as drew from several (although most notably Western Contemporary) dance forms, they were always marketed as Contemporary South Asian dance. Although highly creative and engaging, such performances were much more than performances of South Asian dance. Yet, their presentation as South Asian-inspired (even if they were indeed South Asian-inspired) naturalised the relation between South Asian dance and contemporary anxieties regarding cultural identity. Furthermore, this identity was often presented as the very barrier to the complexities of cultural dialogue, as is captured in the closing lines of the promotional material for one such performance:

Expect to see precise and well-articulated movement which challenges ideas of form, identity and artistic freedom, all executed with the utmost grace. By reducing the cultural specificity and religious associations of Bharata Natyam, [the Company] revives the language of South Indian dance and makes this unique art form more accessible.

Here, South Asian dance remains the ethnic dance par excellence as Indian classical dance – strongly associated with Indian ‘cultural specificity and religious associations’ – becomes the grounds from which Contemporary South Asian dance can emerge to explore (‘modern’) perceptions of diasporic identity rooted in national (Indian) cultural anxiety. The strive for universality continues while fossilised culture – the ‘language of South Indian dance’ that must be ‘revived’ – remains the grounds from which such attempts are made.

The relationship between Indian classical and Contemporary South Asian dance in the British context is thus temporalised; this is a relationship that operationalises discourses of tradition and modernity and projects onto Indian culture an evolutionary schema that presents it as static once more. Just as classical dance in the twentieth century was defined in reference to the parameters of Western classicism and colonial/nationalist constructions of tradition, so too is Contemporary South Asian dance tied to hegemonic definitions of contemporaneity established in the U.K. Furthermore, just as Contemporary South Asian dance now stands in the shadow of (Western) Contemporary dance, aspiring to its ideals and definitions of professionalism, Indian classical dance also exists within the context of and in relation to Contemporary South Asian dance. The evolutionary hierarchy remains intact. This is not to discount the merits of either genre, nor to suggest that South Asian dance – classical and/or contemporary – exist merely as derivative forms. Rather, I seek to highlight the extent to which the very definition of genres of dance styles enact a historically loaded narrative that comes from a particular context – that of cultural imperialism, nationalist reclamation, gendered, caste and class-based dispossession and the subsequent contemporary politics of identity formation. This history – and the power relations that sustain it – is still in the making.

**Femininity, Sexuality, Desire**

It is in their concern to depict particular ideals of femininity that Indian classical dancers demonstrate one of the clearest links to the nationalist politics in which the twentieth-century reconstruction of the dance must be contextualised. Postcolonial and feminist scholarship on Indian nationalism has drawn attention to the gendered contours of this political movement (Chatterjee 1999; Grewal 1996; Mani 1998; Mohanram 1999; Ramaswamy 2010; Sangari and Vaid 1989); steered by a mobile, educated and elite intelligentsia, this movement – and the gender norms of feminine purity and propriety it projected – reflected the particular religious, cultural, caste and class ideals of the nationalist leadership who sought to fashion national unity in opposition to British rule. The Indian nation thus came to be constituted through the specific lens of the upper-caste and upper-class Hindu elite, despite the heterogeneity and inequality of socio-economic status among the population this elite claimed, in theory, to represent.

The ideal of ‘Indian’ femininity to which dancers today aspire signals the success of the nationalist movement in conflating the morality and purity of the nation with its culture and women. For example, a male dancer of South Asian origin suggested in an interview that:

Because if you grew up in India or within Indian culture, you have Indianness, there’s a certain – like a woman will have lajja. There’s no word for lajja, it’s...
not shame, it’s not modesty, it’s just a virtue, it’s not even that. So that’s a very Indian thing.

Indeed, the word lājja conjures up simultaneously notions of honour and shame in ways that neither word can capture alone in English. It also connotes ideas of coyness and modesty, which dancers repeatedly claimed were crucial to the ‘authenticity’ of their performance. But without careful historicisation and contextualisation, can such a representation of femininity as chaste, honourable and modest be considered a ‘very Indian thing’? An analysis of when and why such attributes are deployed and celebrated, and to what end, is crucial.

While South Asian dancers tended to consider their depiction of particular feminine virtues such as coyness and modesty as vital to the success of their dance practice, non-South Asian dancers tended to appeal to a generic ideal of Orientalised femininity. Both representations are however related by such idealisation of the ‘femininity’ of Indian classical dance as different from, and foreign to, the Western/modern context. Take for example the explanation one dance student provided regarding her desire to learn her form, which she described as ‘the ultimate in terms of all the styles … because it’s so feminine and it’s much softer, it’s more beautiful’. When I asked why this dancer was drawn to the feminine traits she associated with her form, she responded:

I think because women, especially women now, women of my generation and maybe any other generation as well, have become very – I don’t know if it’s aggressive – but have had to become very strong, very cold, very … almost like men, if you want to look at it from an old school point of view, you know. And I think that we’re moving away from our femininity a lot. And I think that Odissi celebrates it, right. And it allows you to be ultimately feminine. Yeah, that’s a big part of it. And you know, it’s a way to express femininity without shame. Without any, you know sexuality around it, and so with the sexuality can come the shame part of it. It’s a way of expressing femininity that’s pure, in my mind. And it feels so ancient, that it … that the part that it’s so ancient kind of gives you that license to express that.

While this celebration of femininity exemplifies the bifurcation of the dance and its representation of an ideal removed from its sexualised connotations, such representation also projects this form of femininity back onto antiquity. For this dancer, the femininity that Odissi enables her to experience is articulated as a critique of modern (Western) variants of the feminine whereby women are seen to take on such ‘masculine’ traits as aggression and acquisitiveness in their desire to advance socially and professionally.

This excerpt presents an interesting resemblance to earlier Euro-American dancers who would perform as ‘Indian’ women in order to access embodied experiences they imagined to be unattainable on account of their ethno-cultural identities. For example, Jowitt (1989) argues that representations of the devadasi temple dancer in nineteenth- and twentieth-century European operas and plays attributed this figure a passion considered highly inappropriate for ‘proper’ European ‘ladies’. Performing the character of a devadasi thus allowed the European dancer to embody, and the audience to consume, an exotic sensuality/sexuality that did not compromise the dignity of the European women who both performed and observed this figure in play. Might the quotation above provide a glimpse into how the extension of this exoticised embodiment is deployed in the present? Having been successfully sanitised (nationalised), Odissi – a modern-day incarnation of the ancient temple dance of the devadasi – enables an embodiment of a femininity that stands at odds with the modern neoliberal competitive, aggressive and careerist qualities women are now considered to have taken on.

Importantly, this desire to be ‘ultimately feminine’ and not ‘like men’ reveals a complicated response to the rise of a particular form of Western feminism in the second half of the twentieth century (see Ahmed 2010). Hence this response is not simply a re-articulation of the colonial discourses described above, but also a reiteration of these discourses calibrated to the contemporary context. That is, we can trace the ongoing continuities as well as the remaking of coloniality in the ideas expressed by this dancer situated in the present. An ironic inversion of Jowitt’s observations pertaining to the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, its twenty-first century version nonetheless pivots upon similar constructions of the exoticised femininity defined as the essence of Odissi/Indian dance; the devadasi figure discussed by Jowitt and the one alluded to in my interview are both experienced as attractive for their defiance of the social norms relating to ‘Western’ femininity. The terms of this difference may have changed – an exotic sexuality in the past compared to a demure coquetry in the present – but the assumption and allure of difference remains intact. Noticeably, Western femininity is also inverted in this description, as the nineteenth-century ‘lady’ becomes the twenty-first century ‘very strong, very cold’ masculinised woman.

Implicit in these constructions of femininity are discourses of desire that can also be traced back to the colonial encounter. As Yeğenoğlu (1998) has demonstrated, the desire for the Other – intrinsically linking
Orientalism to discourses of sexuality – has been central to Orientalist and colonial projects. Although largely theorised epistemologically, desire nonetheless has real-life implications as is clearly apparent in some dancers’ explanations of why they wanted to learn Indian classical dance. This manifestation of desire is particularly evident in accounts of non-South Asian dancers who did not feel they had a cultural connection upon which to base their relationship to the dance they wished to learn. For example, one (white) dancer explained why she began training in an Indian classical dance form:

Well, I went to India in 2000 and just saw the dancing and kind of fell in love with the culture, the colours, you know everything. But being totally honest, which is I’m sure what you want for your research, I saw a film, The Kama Sutra by Mira Nair. And in it was some dancing, and I thought that was the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen ... And as we do these days, we google everything don’t we. So I googled it and found out it was Odissi, and then looked for a teacher in my area.

This dancer’s reference to The Kama Sutra (1996) was not the only instance in which I have come across dancers citing this film as the source of inspiration in pursuing dance training. There are a number of scenes in this film that feature Odissi choreographies, but these were not performed by dancers who had received extensive training in the form. The film is a reference to the Sanskrit text by the same name that dates between 400 BCE and 200 CE and that is (and has been) notoriously read as a sex ‘manual’ (see Roy 2000); in the cinematic version Nair presents a modern-day phantasy of a lavish Orientalist phantasy of ancient India. The dancers who credit this film for their motivation to study dance thus act on discourses of desire, sexuality and Orientalism as they actively seek out and study a particular Indian classical dance form in the present. Historical discourses as well as re-presentations of ‘history’ (i.e. the film) merge with and invoke contemporary desires demonstrating the complex workings of coloniality.

Conclusion

In this article, I have interrogated the ways in which performances of Indian classical and Contemporary South Asian dance are shaped by constructs of temporality, cultural identity and gendered desire that demonstrate continuities with, as well as remakings of, colonial discourse. I did so by briefly outlining the coloniality of the construction of Indian classical dance as ancient and traditional, especially in relation to the emergent category of Contemporary South Asian dance, and by discussing the association of Indian classical dance with particular forms of femininity. This play between past and present, ancient and modern, as well as the ongoing Orientalism and discourses of desire it encapsulates, is neatly summed up in a 2011 review in The Guardian describing a performance in the U.K. by the celebrated Odissi troupe, Nrityagram:

South Asian dance is thriving in Britain, yet most of the work grabbing the limelight tends to be some form of contemporary fusion: classical Indian dance mixed with modern western moves, Kathak mashed with hip-hop. So it’s a particular pleasure to see the Edinburgh debut of the Nrityagram Ensemble from Bangalore – a company dedicated to reviving the most ancient of Indian dances, Odissi.

Odissi originated from the Hindu and tantric temples of Orissa, and in contrast to the more chiselled angles of bharatanatyam (the form most widely seen in the UK), it celebrates the beauty of the curve. Movement snakes and undulates through the dancer’s body: opening out in lavish sweeps of her upper torso, rippling in a gracious eddy along her arm, settling in the delicate curl of her finger.

... This is an ancient dance, joyously and sexily performed in the present tense. (Mackrell 2011, emphasis added)

The titillating interplay between Orientalism and sexuality is articulated here for the twenty-first century where ‘the most ancient of Indian dances’ provides a ‘particular pleasure’ when it is ‘sexily performed in the present tense’. Moreover, this excerpt demonstrates that, contrary to what some dancers claim, a focus on the body and physicality of the dance does not move away from the overdetermination of Indian classical dance as cultural artefact; indeed, shaped by discourses of desire, some culturally inscribed bodies remain objectified as colonial desire finds its articulation in the postcolonial present.

In my attempt to trace the ongoing effects of coloniality in contemporary dance practices and performances, I have advocated the study of quotidian dance practices over the overt and arguably less frequent examples of blatant reproductions of Orientalism. To focus on the quotidian in an ethnographic study – I maintain – enables a deeper understanding of the ways in which discourses that emerged in the colonial context are sustained in the present, even when they are recalibrated towards contemporary circumstances. However, at the end of my analysis, I find that the two – the quotidian and the blatant – are indeed two
points on a single discursive spectrum. The overtly Orientalist photograph of an Indian classical dancer posing in a costume more readily associated with belly dance (itself a construct shaped by Orientalist fantasy, see Çelik and Kinney 2008; Said 2001) is but an extension of the dancer seeking the acquisition of a particular sensuality and femininity in Indian classical dance. The quotidian makes possible the overt, and grounds it in the everyday. Ethnography, with its focus on the everyday, has an important role to play in bringing to light contemporary continuities of coloniality.

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**Notes**

1. The term South Asian arts/dance is commonly used in the British context. While the term is intended to include the arts of the various countries of the subcontinent, India and ‘Indianness’ are however privileged in this categorisation and often used interchangeably with the designation South Asian. This problematic is unfortunately beyond the scope of this present article, which employs terms as they were used in my research field.

2. Striking are the parallels between the exhibition at the Alchemy Festival and the more recent Exhibit B, the installation cancelled by the Barbican after protests criticised it for reinforcing rather than challenging the racism behind the ‘human zoos’ of earlier colonial times. While a deeper comparison is unfortunately beyond the scope of my present article, it is interesting to note how the already politicised nature of Exhibit B enabled critical dialogue and protest, whereas the ‘aesthetic’ and ‘cultural’ priorities of Alchemy served to depoliticise it. This aesthetic depoliticisation may have rendered any similarities to its colonial antecedents less palpable, but they are no less perceptible.

3. Indian classical dance is an umbrella term that refers to Bharatanatyam, Odissi, Kathak, Manipuri, Mohiniyattam, Kathakali and Kuchipudi, all of which have been designated as classical forms of dance by the Sangeet Natak Akademi. The first three are the most popular in the U.K., and as such the forms upon which my observations are based. These styles of dance rely upon narratives of ancient history and utilise codified techniques derived from the *Natya Shastra*, a Sanskrit text commonly dated to the early Common Era.

4. I use the term Contemporary South Asian to discuss the burgeoning genre of dance in the South Asian arts community, most famously associated with performers such as Shobana Jayasingh and Akram Khan. Although the genre is less codified and therefore more difficult to define than Indian classical dance, dancers often draw on some level of Indian classical dance and/or musical forms, often in conjunction with other (predominantly Western) Contemporary dance techniques. In this article, I specifically consider Contemporary South Asian Dance (British) and not Indian Contemporary Dance (Indian), which emerged as a prominent genre in the last three decades. Although Katrak (2011) includes diasporic examples in her study of Indian Contemporary Dance, I maintain the importance of studying the specific contexts of such production – the U.K., in my case – in order to trace the social and political implications of its performance. Indeed, as I found in my research, British Contemporary South Asian dancers distinguished themselves and their work from Indian Contemporary Dance/rs, sometimes even claiming to be decades ahead of their Indian counterparts. An evolutionary schema is maintained once more.

5. This process of classicisation is of a piece with the activities of the nationalist intelligentsia detailed by Fanon, for example (2004; see also Chatterjee 1999).

6. Whether or not these venues are ‘mainstream’ is open to debate as their prominence in the performance arts world invests them with a particular form of cultural (and of course financial) capital. However, they are regarded to be ‘culturally neutral’ and therefore part of the British (white) mainstream.

7. The most prominent South Asian dance agency in the U.K. is London-based Akademi. They are known for promoting both Indian classical and Contemporary South Asian dance as well as providing mentoring, funding and performance opportunities (for more on Akademi, see Meduri 2008). Like the dancers with whom I worked, these agencies also articulate a desire to transcend the cultural stasis with which Indian classical dance is associated and advocate developing Contemporary South Asian dance platforms in order to gain professional recognition. Although I value these attempts to move beyond cultural essentialism, I am troubled by the ways in which these articulations are constrained by a longer history of the evolutionary logic of colonial discourses.
References