Introduction: World Fairs, Exhibitions and Anthropology
Revisiting Contexts of Post-colonialism

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ABSTRACT
World fairs and exhibitions served as important venues for empires to showcase their industrial and technological achievements. Moreover, they also presented ‘civilisational models’ that portrayed Europeans as the most advanced and sophisticated and depicted the distant inhabitants as exotic and primitive. In portraying distant peoples, these contrasts were evident through their dress styles, dance, music, and performance of daily customs, but most noticeably, through their skin colours. With five articles focusing on world fairs and exhibitions in diverse locations and times, this special issue raises questions about the display and showcasing of humans that are still pertinent to the current contexts of anthropology. The articles call for ‘decolonising’ thoughts, discourses, and practices in political and public space in displaying contemporary cultures. While acknowledging the problematics and limits of ‘decolonisation’ itself, the articles reassess through a critical lens the connections between fairs and exhibitions in the early days of anthropology.

KEYWORDS
anthropology and fieldwork, colonial ideologies and practices, (de)-colonisation, history of anthropology, human displays, Indigenous groups, world fairs

Great fairs, associated or not with religious festivals, dates to medieval times, but later they spread internationally. Having been held since the 1790s in Europe on different occasions, including the coronation of kings, world fairs expanded to the New World to celebrate industrialisation, modernity, and the achievements of the Western nations in imperial-colonial metropolises. Inspired by Marcel Mauss, Burton Benedict (1983) characterised world fairs as enormous potlatches and ritual feasts of wealth and power (Matos 2014: 1). With five articles focusing on diverse, less-mapped territories, this special issue examines various aspects of world fairs and other great exhibitions in the past and the repercussions they may still have on late twentieth and

Since the eighteenth century, world fairs and industrial expositions, as specific ‘knowledge formats’ (Färber 2006) that had global claims (Finnegan and Wright 2015), have increasingly became influential on different layers of societies, including the patrons and supporters, as well as the educated elite. These spaces for the organised display of objects and people that emerged from the eighteenth to the beginning of the twentieth century, in tandem with the rise of industrial capitalism, have changed the representational landscape in the process. It is customarily accepted that the phenomenon of fairs and exhibitions, which took place in several metropoles, began with the International Exhibition held in 1851 at the Crystal Palace in London (The Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of All Nations), which was followed by the 1853 Crystal Palace Fair in New York and by several others. In many ways, London 1851 was the beginning of a new exhibition model: the colonial exhibition ‘which almost always featured the presence of indigenous human beings’ (Sánchez-Gómez 2013: 3), seeking to highlight the progress and achievements made by the organising cities, nations, and empires. Human beings, in this sense, became part of the larger colonial enterprise proudly exhibiting collections of ethnographic objects acquired (or stolen) from around the world. Ostensibly, products displayed were arranged in such a way to show the assumed hierarchy between the industrial and ‘primitive’ societies in terms of economic, technological, and social characteristics. These evolutionary ideas were often associated with a scale constructed from skin colour (in terms of a chromatic spectrum) and were not only reproduced in world fairs and exhibitions but also supported by anthropological theory and popular consciousness (Matos 2013).

World fairs and exhibitions, a phenomenon that lasted until the Second World War, became platforms whereby people of religious missions and other socially or economically prominent figures such as businessmen collaborated, or at least interacted with one and the other. They became important popular culture genres both for anthropologists and other actors, as they were simultaneously embedded in great logistic investments. In the case of international exhibitions, several countries competed among themselves. At the same time, the participating hosts and organising nations expected compensations in terms of the exhibits’ worldwide publicity and achievements. Therefore, it is no surprise that wealthy individuals, institutions, and museums infused the fairs with elements of trade and business, shaping
several aspects of society, like art-and-design education, tourism, and international trade (Davis 2008: 13–14). Prominently, they influenced developments in architecture, music, visual arts, urban planning, consumption, and mass entertainment; as well as the ‘coalescence’ and institutionalisation of anthropology as an academic discipline in certain cases (Hinsley and Wilcox 2016; L’Estoile 2004).

The fusing elements incorporated in fairs and exhibitions had blurring effects on these representational genres, causing organisers to question the de-limitability of each genre and who felt the need to establish differences between both. In 1928 in Paris delegates of thirty-one participating countries joined in a meeting that would give rise to the BIE (Bureau International des Expositions), an intergovernmental organisation which regulates all international exhibitions that last more than three weeks (BIE n.d.). They distinguished between expos/expositions to have a ‘non-commercial nature’ as opposed to fairs to have a ‘commercial purpose’; accordingly, exhibitions were instruments ‘of education and teaching’ – a ‘temporary, pedagogical and technical museum’. Moreover, exhibitions were accompanied by congresses and festivals that aimed for a diverse audience, showing a greater care with the displays (Cunha 1933: 10–11).

Different from fairs, and with educational objectives, the exhibitions could have parallel scientific congresses, as was the case in the Paris Colonial Exhibition in 1931 and in the Porto Colonial Exhibition in 1934. As unique occasions, exhibitions paved the ground for the development of physical anthropology, for instance by the performance of anthropometric measurements, sometimes seeking to ascribe the place of some individuals or peoples on a civilisational scale. As such, they became privileged spaces for the development of anthropological knowledge, especially in nineteenth-century physical anthropology, and later, in social and cultural anthropology, albeit with less gravity in terms of the latter. These events lasted through the first decades of the twentieth century and became widespread in the interwar period. After the First World War, and during the economic crises of the 1930s, some European governments used exhibitions to promote the idea of the empire and imperialism, which they considered essential for modernity and progress. They sought to show the supposed benefits of colonialism for the colonisers and the colonised, though the distinction between these two exhibition genres were not stable and certain characteristics of world fairs influenced the exhibitions analysed here. Most of the articles included in this special issue speak to the ‘exhibition’ category, that is, to the events that
culminated scientific pursuits parallel to industrial and technological achievements.

Particularly, human exhibits at the fairs aimed to show the ‘vision of empire’ (Blanchard et al. 2004; Corbey 1993; Greenhalgh 1988; Greenhalgh 2011; Matos 2014), whereby Indigenous populations were cruelly exploited. Sometimes referred to as ‘ethnic shows’, human displays, human zoos, or human parks, these ‘living ethnological exhibitions’, to borrow the term from Sánchez-Gómez (2013, emphasis in the original), drew an immense number of visitors. This illustrated the true purpose behind the organisation of these shameful acts. In fact, the aims of imperialism, industrial and technical developments, and consumerism all contributed to the desire for displaying the ‘primitives’ who were turned into ‘a relatively accessible object of study for certain sections of society’ and who were presented to the public wanting for more ‘real’ encounters with them (Sánchez-Gómez 2013: 3).

On a different scale, ‘exhibition spaces’ – places where exhibitions were held, are comparable to places of popular entertainment, such as exhibition halls, theatres, circuses, botanic gardens, and temporary or permanent exhibitions held by missionary societies and natural history museums – all sought to present the representatives of other ‘races’ and/or other species (Blanchard et al. 1995). The colonial exhibitors considered peoples shown at the exhibits to be closer to nature than to civilisation. Therefore, sometimes they were placed behind barriers or wire fences. They were also ‘displayed’ in fairgrounds, public parks, or botanical gardens, such as the Jardin d’Acclimatation de Paris. Created in 1859 by Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire, its mission was to enable the study of exotic animals and plants. After some time, animal specimens have become the main or even exclusive attraction of visitors captivated by the exotic. The conflation of humans with animals on display further contributed to grotesque notions of ‘the primitive’.

At the Philadelphia Universal Exposition in 1876, approximately three hundred Native Americans, members of fifty-three different groups were brought in, camping out on the Centennial grounds at this first World’s Fair to be held in the United States upon the one hundredth anniversary of the American Declaration of Independence. Paris saw in 1878 the first major exhibition of non-Western individuals in purpose-built pavilions and ‘indigenous villages’ which exhibited four hundred natives from the French colonies of Indochina, Senegal and Tahiti. At the Paris Exposition Universelle 1889, ‘ethnographic villages’ were also reconstructed (Birkalan-Gedik 2017). The 1893 Chicago International Exhibition received natives from Java, Samoa,
Dahomey, Egypt, and North America. The contact with exotic animals and different people additionally gave visitors the idea that the exhibitions allowed them to travel without leaving their homes.

The organisers sought to present diversity and what they thought to be ‘exotic’ in these displays. They intended to show the power of some countries over distant territories and their inhabitants. Sometimes the organisers attempted to convey the idea that they were presenting real performances; however, they presented a theatre or staged performances prepared for the exhibition. As Sánchez-Gómez underlined, although they gave demonstrations of their skills, their role was simply as exhibits (2013). Often, the people who participated in the ‘ethnic performances’ did not even know the language of the coloniser or of the countries who hosted them. There were sometimes interpreters, who spoke the languages of both sides, but they knew little or nothing about the culture of the groups represented there. The same was true of journalists who reported on the exhibitions, who hardly understood the languages spoken by the participants in the exhibitions. In addition, the fact that some groups have different religions or practices was a representational challenge for organisers and visitors.

Almost two centuries later, today, the relation between world fairs, exhibitions and anthropology remains a well mapped-out area in ‘Western’ academia. In his classic study, Robert W. Rydell (1985) offered a holistic assessment on the mutually beneficial relationships between world’s fairs and institutions such as the Smithsonian. Rydell (1985) demonstrated how a national and transnational hegemony, based on an assumed Anglo-Saxon white supremacy was created. Furthermore, several anthropologists tackled famous fairs which became landmark events, such as the World’s Columbian Exposition, known as the Chicago World’s Fair or the World’s Fair of 1893, which hosted a ‘human park’ that displayed the natives of various cultures in mock villages (Hinsley and Wilcox 2016; Birkalan-Gedik 2017). Organised to celebrate the four hundredth anniversary of the arrival of Christopher Columbus to the Americas, the fair became a pivotal moment in the ‘coalescence’ of North American anthropology (Hinsley and Wilcox 2016). In a similar vein, Benoît de L’Estoile underlined that the 1931 International Colonial Exhibition of Paris, which was seen as an instance of ‘colonial picturesque, may in fact be seen as a missing link in the history of French anthropology’ (2004: 341).

The topic of world fairs and exhibitions, as well as their relationship to the emerging field of anthropology, reveal that exhibitions
became prominent sites for some ethnologists and anthropologists to gather ‘scientific’ data since they allegedly offered opportunities for fieldwork. Fairs were more convenient to researchers as people from distant countries were brought ‘here’ (to their home countries), whereby anthropologists otherwise studied ‘there’ (Ballestero, Ladeira, Vieira, Kerimova and Zolotukhina, in this issue; Hinsley and Wilcox 2016; Parezo and Fowler 2009). This intricate relationship unveils an entangled history in which industrialisation and cultural exchange, but also racialist and nationalist endeavours interact. This aspect, we hope, will help unveil anthropology’s involvement with the imperial-colonial enterprise (L’Estoile et al. 2005). Some countries started to use expositions as a platform to improve their national profile, obscuring the boundaries between participation and representation as well as between the coloniser and the colonised. The 1878 and 1889 Parisian world fairs presented a village nègre, a negro village (Birkalan-Gedik 2020), and a reconstruction of urban Cairo as the rue du Caire as well as other giant dioramas (Birkalan-Gedik 2020, 2021; Çelik 1992; Mitchell 1988). Muslim groups in the fairs were in-betweeners, mostly seen as representatives from ‘other’ empires, who, nonetheless, stood between the ‘far and exotic’ and the ‘Western’ and became the embodiment of the ‘Orient’ for the ‘Western eye’ (Birkalan-Gedik 2021). For example, the presence of the Ottoman Empire in several world fairs was not limited to their roles as visitors or spectators. They became active participants who show the permeability of these categories.

Articles included in this issue harken back to the panel convened at the 2020 EASA online conference in Lisbon (entitled World Fairs, Exhibitions, and Anthropology: Revisiting Contexts of Post/Colonialism), by Hande Birkalan-Gedik, Patrícia Ferraz de Matos, and Andrés Barrera-González). Pegi Vail, who presented her work at the panel joined the team of editors. Altogether, we endeavoured to take these discussions to new planes, dimensions, and locales. The articles in this issue critically evaluate revealing cases in the examples of Rio de Janeiro 1882, London 1883, and New York 1884, as well as Buenos Aires 1898 and 1910, Paris 1931, and Moscow 1867, and illuminate on less-studied anthropological traditions, which so far remained at the margins of the ‘mainstream’ practices (Barrera-González, Heintz and Horolets 2017). The articles question the dominance of Northern, European, and Western representations and offer critical perspectives that can alter existing anthropological interpretations and representations.
Articles featured in this issue not only examine the interactions between anthropology and exhibitions in different national contexts but also connect local issues to the global politics of cultural representation, Indigenous rights, and women’s rights as critical components of human rights movements, principally offering anti-racist discourses and criticising colonial legacies. Clearly, the relationship between ‘race’ and ‘display’ is not one-layered but is a result of a complex interplay (King 2019). As Lee D. Baker showed how the ‘racial politics of culture’ and the ‘cultural politics of race’ developed (2010: 30), world fairs and exhibitions have not only been interesting cultural genres but also fascinating and disputed knowledge sites.

Calling attention to such critical intersections, the articles also offer useful methodologies on the study of world fairs and exhibitions. The contributors relied on archival documents as well as critical discourse analyses of press presentations and commentaries on some of specific expositions. We, as editors, believe that the entwined relationship between anthropology, exhibitions, and post/coloniality needed the utmost attention, especially under the light of roles that anthropologists took in these events (exhibitions and initiatives that were parallel to the exhibitions). On several occasions their involvement shaped both anthropology and politics of display in unique ways, in different times, and in different national traditions.

‘Human displays’ are one of the central issues that cut across in this volume. Articles by Marina Cavalcante Vieira and Juliana Coelho de Souza Ladeira take the readers to new territories in which live ethnological exhibitions of the ‘exotic’ were created and displayed. This topic is indeed central to Vieira’s article, but tangential to Ladeira’s and Ballesteros’. It is not at all an issue addressed in Freeman’s article, who instead focuses on immigrants or the Indigenous peoples who posed ‘threats’ to the internal unity of a bourgeois nation. The article by Mariam Kerimova and Maria Zolotukhina offers a very interesting counterpoint to the other cases previously presented and discussed. The organisers of the Moscow Ethnographic Exhibition of 1867 do not physically exploit bodies of people from the different Slavic countries and territories. They use mannequins instead, and they collect (or build on the premises) original musical instruments, inviting local dance ensembles and folklore experts from Slavic territories to perform and lecture at the Moscow Ethnographic Exhibition. The emphasis on ‘ethnography’ gives profound insights into the Russian and Eastern European tradition in labelling anthropology as ethnology, ethnography, or folklore studies, which also contributes
to the idea of studying lesser-represented national practices in the anthropological landscape. The contrasts and differences with the Western European and North American traditions in the understanding and practicing of anthropology – a term that in Russia is reserved exclusively for physical anthropology – not only show the contrasts in disciplinary terms but also complicate their boundaries. Such telling contrasts and specificities of the Russian and Eastern European academic ‘tradition’ within anthropology is a very important reason for including Kerimova and Zolotukhina’s work in this issue.

While human zoos stood out as central attractions, as ‘spectacles’ in world fairs and exhibitions, they also represented a vision of science to anthropologists (Blanchard et al. 2004, 2011). One line of thought can take the readers to explore the link between displays, race, different kinds of nationalisms and the relation that may exist between these kinds of exhibitions and colonialism. For example, when international criticism of colonialism increased, exhibitions that focused on the colonial theme were considered moral attacks. However, some countries, such as Portugal, sought to strengthen their image as colonial countries that respected the diversity and rights of the inhabitants of their empire, precisely through exhibitions (Matos 2013). Thus, these exhibitions effectively legitimised and indeed, therefore promoted colonialism. Essentially, they evidenced the popular misconceptions of Charles Darwin’s discoveries (1859) and Herbert Spencer’s interpretation of Darwin’s work to promote a ‘social Darwinism’ that argued the ‘survival of the fittest’ (1864).

Finally, the display of women as central objects (Birkalan-Gedik 2021; Boisseau and Markwyn 2010; Matos 2021; Vicente 2017) can offer contexts on women’s human rights but also Indigenous rights and help us, anthropologists, who now come from a growing diversity of racial and cultural backgrounds, to face one of the greatest burdens of anthropology in the controversial legacy of colonialism. Perhaps it would be a timely reconsideration to deepen the occasion and the way human beings came to be ‘objects’ of display, as earlier works centred on the theme of displaying cultures (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998, Rydell 1985; Stocking 1988), or in works that incorporated the importance of human display to the colonial project, as well as considering the agency of those featured in these exhibits (Matos 2014; Mitchell 1988).

The articles presented in this issue focus on specific cases, displays in different exhibitions in Europe or by European empires or nations. Marina Cavalcante Vieira, who has written extensively on exhibiting
Botocudos discusses the journey of this group, who were presented in the National Museum of Rio de Janeiro in 1882 and later in England and the USA. The author analyses the transformation of narratives and representations from the museum’s official exhibition in London and the presentation of Botocudos in England in 1883 and the USA in 1883 and 1884. Employing critical discourse analysis of reports on these exhibitions published in selective newspapers, she demonstrates that the presentation of peoples was just one time event which expanded over time, although the anthropological knowledge and genres of presentation and representation may have interacted and even overlapped.

In the next article, Juliana Coelho de Souza Ladeira takes dancing as not only a form of public entertainment but also a device for displaying an ‘effect of authenticity’. Here, in this specific context, the ‘effect of authenticity’ refers to an attempt to reproduce and display the French empire and its colonies, materialise and visualise its civilising values, and bring the Indigenous populations from far and remote locations to the near metropolis. Juliana Ladeira critically unveils how these shows are meant, in fact, for the pure entertainment and amusement of the public, in some instances at least, as well as for the benefit of the popular press that report daily on events happening in the exposition, with great success in terms of popular reception, and the exponential growth of the number of copies of newspaper and magazines sold, considering the avid consumption of these periodicals by the public. Her evaluation of the press discourses about Balinese performances at the Paris 1931 International Colonial Exhibition, the largest event organised by the French Republic in the last century, is also a timely critique of human displays, whereby she demonstrates that gender was a central organising principle for displaying the ‘exotic’. The choice of organisers on putting the Balinese women on display, furthermore, shows that women stood for the nation or a specific group, symbolically. As such, the article contributes to understanding the relationship of world fairs and exhibitions to the study of race, gender, and sexuality and as well as to the larger discussion on the transnational representation of Indonesian women (Rony 2022). See, also, the highly original commentary on the Balinese dancers’ performance by French playwright and theatre director Antonin Artaud, after watching the live performance, more than once (Artaud, 1931).

The article by Diego Ballestero tackles the work of German anthropologist Robert Lehmann-Nitsche (1872–1938) and its relations to
anthropological exhibitions. Focusing on Argentinean Indigenous groups, Diego Ballestero examines the use of fairs and exhibitions as privileged space for ‘fieldwork’ for scholars of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in Argentina (1898–1904). This practice can serve as a timely reconsideration of anthropological ‘boundary work’, and its discussion contributes to the analysis on the dishevelled relationship between anthropologists and their involvement in world fairs and exhibitions. This article provides a convenient transition to the wider ranging remarks of the article written by Nicolas Freeman.

According to Freeman, Buenos Aires International Centennial Exposition (1910) not only laid the foundational moment of the nationalist state and a capitalist economy but also created a counterpoint to the internal unity of the (bourgeois) nation – the immigrant or the Indigenous. Freeman defends his argument based on the analysis of the rhetoric of the displays, its architecture and monuments. He shows that Argentinian elites in this historical conjunction, were mostly worried about the internal threat – the workers, the immigrants, or the Indigenous peoples – to their project on ‘nation building’. They were also worried about the image of their country, and their own management of the situation, that reached the ‘Western-civilised’ world, which they are trying to emulate. In this article, as in other cases, rekindling memories of the past can open wounds which are not healed.

The concluding article by Mariam Kerimova and Maria Zolotukhina presents a textual analysis of what they claim to be the previously unknown archival documents on the First all-Russian Ethnographic Exhibition in 1867. The authors argue that through this exhibition, the imperial Russia served to structuring and further developing academic anthropological (ethnographic) knowledge. In comparison to other imperial (or colonial cases) which relied on the dichotomy of the ‘advanced’ colonisers vis à vis the ‘primitive’ colonised, crucial for the Russian case was to prove both the diversity and the unity of the peoples in Russian empire and its foreign Slavic regions. The case of the Russian empire, by all means, is not a singled-out case, as it evokes the case of Portugal, who utilised exhibitions to give an image of an empire that respects the diversity of its inhabitants (Matos 2013). These instances can serve to challenge the prevailing narrative on world fairs, colonialism, and anthropology.

Finally, revisiting the world fairs whereby cultures were displayed in different forms and for different aims prompts us to reconsider their repercussions in contemporary exhibitions. Scholars contributed to
conceptualising the pivotal role that museums and exhibitions played in the development of anthropology between 1850–1920 (Stocking 1988). Curtis Hinsley took the World’s Columbian Exposition as ‘marketplace’ where the exotic cultures were displayed (Hinsley 1991). Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (1998) problematised several aspects of exhibition practices, participation, and the representation of cultures, people, and ‘ethnographic’ objects. For Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, who critically wrote on museumisation and ethnographic objects, human displays at world fairs were also prototypes for tourism in terms of the discourses they produced; she called particular attention to the notion of the ‘agency of display’ (1998).

Whether it is the human displays in the nineteenth-century world fairs or ‘exhibiting cultures’ in modern museums, cinema and on the internet (Vail 2020), it is necessary to decolonise practices and thought in political and public space. By bringing five carefully penned, original works on world fairs and exhibitions, and their relationship with anthropology, post-coloniality, and representation in non-European contexts, we hope that the readers find this special issue to be an informative, inspirational, and useful oeuvre – a timely revisit to an important past in anthropology. This volume was prepared amid a global pandemic, during a year when the Black Lives Matter movement gained global traction, partly addressing how the perception and representation of Black, Brown, and Indigenous people over many centuries has affected economies and physical lives in the present. All in all, articles in this issue raise questions on power, privilege, and anthropological storytelling. We can still ask today about what to do with the colonial past in terms of the stories being told through exhibitions, museums, photos and films, monuments, and statues. We can reflect on the place of some monuments in public space, objects that are kept in some museums and collections that are often not made known as having been collected in contexts of exploration (Hicks 2020), and the ‘touristification’ of colonial history that can be found in several countries. We do not have the answer to all these questions, but at least we hope that this issue can help readers to find the answers to some of them.

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