

INTRODUCTION

Circus Bodies that Matter

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Abstract

Placing the performing animals and humans from the Global South and analyzing those extensive historical accounts are imperative for contemporary circus studies. The chapters in this volume address a range of topics such as colonialism, anthropocentrism, racism, and global capitalism in the historical contexts of performing bodies. The voyages of subaltern acrobats from the Global South to other parts of the world, especially the Global North, in search of new modes of economic and social capital date back to more than a century. Mobility and migration are overarching themes in all the chapters, traversing through the many times and spaces across the Global South and North.

Keywords: Circus; Body; Subaltern; Global South; Race; Archives

Considering the global popularity of circus performances, circus studies, regrettably, remains in the periphery of the academia and the publishing world. Unlike popular film studies, for instance, the scope and extent of circus studies still continue to be limited in terms of its histories, forms, and transnational and regional connections. Except for some fascinating memoirs, historical studies, and literary fiction generated from Europe, United States, and Australia, circus in the Global South remains more or less unexplored. Although many countries in the Global South have extensive and exciting narratives of this physical culture and peripatetic industry, the few major volumes which have come out have lamentably overlooked this vast field with its rich histories spanning centuries. To illustrate, in two major anthologies which came out in recent years – *Routledge Circus Studies Reader* (2016) and *The Cambridge Companion to the Circus* (2021) – South Asia is conspicuously absent and Africa, Asia, and Latin America figure only marginally.¹ This edited volume will be addressing this glaring lacuna in tandem with the conceptual, theoretical, and interdisciplinary frameworks of global and transnational historical thoughts.

¹ Tait and Lavers (eds.), *Routledge Circus Studies Reader*; Arrighi and Davis (eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to the Circus*.

The idea of this volume germinated from the international conference, 'Circus Histories and Theories' organized by me at the Centre for Indian Studies in Africa, University of the Witwatersrand on 21–22 June 2018 with support from the Social Science Research Council, New York and the Mellon Foundation. This volume presents circus histories and practices from across the world with a specific focus on the Global South and the highly influential crossings these histories make into the Global North. It is hoped that this volume will substantially contribute not only to the field of circus studies and offer insights into a diversity of circus contexts from regional and transnational perspectives, but also to the historical understandings of the Global South. The volume explores an array of ideas such as subalternity, performance, body, spectatorship, representation, children, indigenous and contemporary technologies, emotion, legality and ethics of human-animal relations, transnational migration, and the structural power of race, gender, and caste. Transnational connections form an overarching theme in most of the chapters, and although as mentioned above, Global South is the focus, Global North and its connected histories are also explored.

Conceptual Contours

Should a circus studies volume be exclusively on the circus, and a focus on the Global South only include explorations of that specific geographical area? 'Circus' does not merely mean the art, performance, or the industry. Any interdisciplinary research on the circus would find that it is deeply entangled with indigenous cultures, colonialisms, and modernities across the globe and the resultant confrontations and negotiations. The transnational and transregional movements of people, animals, and technologies have significantly recast communities, genders, castes, bodies, and cultures all over the world.² Likewise, 'Global South/North' is not an exclusive geographical category but a conceptual framework which encompasses a wide range of socio-economic-political connotations. 'Global South' is used here to refer broadly to countries in Asia, Africa, and Latin America, emphasizing the geopolitical relations of culture, power, and intellectual production which determine its oppositional relation with the 'Global North'. For instance, this collection includes some excellent studies with regard to North America: The chronicling of tenting which significantly defined the circus worlds including that of the Global South and the racist ethnological exhibitions of Africans in the human zoos, museums, and circuses; the purpose being to be able to approach circus studies from the Global South from different peripheries and perspectives.

² See Nisha P. R.'s, *Jumbos and Jumping Devils*, pp. 1–28.

The Senegalese historian and Egyptologist, Cheik Anta Diop has pointed out how ideas of the “southern world” contributed to the “northern cradle” of Aryans. Through the instances of Egyptian and Arab contributions to the world with his decolonial historiography he transfers the focal point away from European and Byzantine civilizations deconstructing the claim of the Western cultural hegemony.³ We still need to explore the significant contributions of the traditional performing cultures like Chinese acrobatics and dances, Russian ballet, Roman gymnastics, kalaripayatt, Capoeira, Vale Tudo, or African hip-hop in the formation of circus acrobatics regionally and globally. Another significance for the focus on the hitherto unexplored terrains of the Global South would be the rich tapestry of personal stories and histories from the margins it could bring to the fore. We should keep in mind that many circus artistes from South Asia, Africa, and Latin America are from the subaltern communities and races. All the eleven chapters in this volume are connected through circus histories but diverge in their epistemological and methodological approaches. Some of the chapters deal with historical pasts while others on contemporary times and events. Let me briefly discuss some overarching themes such as mobility, migration, and the subaltern body. I shall also explore the idea of the circus archives of the Global South and its nature, sources, and methodologies.

Mobility and Migration

Transnational migration across the land and the ocean has been a major theme of many connected/transnational/global histories that emerged as a response to the highly region-bound local/national histories. A consideration of “quite distant societies”, C. A. Bayly strongly argues, can inform regional histories.⁴ Sanjay Subrahmanyam has noted “connected history” as an alternative to “the Grand Narrative of Modernization”.⁵ At the same time, researchers have pointed out the disparity within mobility studies: that certain mobilities were more discussed and transnational migration received much more attention while other significant micro mobilities were neglected.⁶ The Indian Ocean historian Sugata Bose’s work unravels the stories of “proconsuls and pirates, capitalists and laborers, soldiers and sailors, patriots and expatriates, pilgrims and poets”.⁷ Arjun Appadurai has described the flows of people, finance, ideas, and media across national boundaries

³ Diop, *Precolonial Black Africa*, p. 21 & p. 32.

⁴ Bayly, *Remaking the Modern World*, p. 5.

⁵ Subrahmanyam, “Connected Histories”, p. 745; and *Explorations in Connected History*.

⁶ Adey, Bissell, et al. (eds.), *The Routledge Handbook*, pp. 2–3.

⁷ Bose, *A Hundred Horizons*, p. 23.

using the term ‘scapes’.⁸ Scholarship on theater and transnationality have looked at the flows of people and networks across boundaries.⁹ Yet, needless to say, the movement and migration of circus performers and acrobats is one of those invisible tales in transnational/global/connected histories.

Mobility and migration for the purpose of tenting, livelihood, and settlement have been a characteristic feature of many circuses and acrobats. Migration – internal and transnational as well as temporary and settling – has led to the movement of people, goods, ideas, and animals in the circuses of the past and present. Wars and ethnic conflicts, famines and floods, poverty, unemployment, and capital have induced mobility and migration. The movement – voluntary and coercive – of humans, animals, and objects traverses the explorations in this volume. The connected contexts and moments of transnational geographies in circus histories and the lives of the acrobats are explored in detail.

Like the sailors, slaves, traders, industrialists, or pirates, during the colonial era the circus companies and individual acrobats routinely crossed seas and continents to alien lands. The companies would camp for months in a town/city, reap profits and then move on to pitch their tents for their next show. Peta Tait’s chapter analyses how the circuses from Europe, Australia, and America in the 19th and early 20th centuries with their circus acts, economies, and creative technologies traveled to the colonized regions like India and Southeast Asia and amassed capital through entertainment. Peta maps the “lucrative” tour routes of both small and big circuses across continents and oceans (Martinique, Barbados, Shanghai, Calcutta, Madras, Ceylon, Singapore, Batavia, Hyderabad, Colombo, Rangoon, Havana, Paris, and many more) exploring the concepts of mobility, connections, and transnational exchanges through the Pacific, Atlantic, and the Indian Oceans. Analyzing the transnational/global histories of connections, exchanges, and networks from another vantage point, Carey A. Watt charts the global tours of the Prussian showman Eugen Sandow to Asia in the early 20th century and his attempts to form a circus. Carey looks at the life of the body builder and strong man, whose ‘Sandow system’ has stood the test of time. Masculinities, the notions of difference and otherness, merging of different physical cultures like Indian wrestling (*kusti*) and Japanese *ju-jitsu*, and commodification of Sandow’s white European body with ‘physique photography’, are some of the engrossing themes that unfold with these voyages – “via the Atlantic and Indian Oceans and South and East China Seas, from South Africa to Aden, India, the Straits Settlements, Hong Kong and Shanghai”, as Carey puts it. Since these areas and subjects have hardly been explored within the global/

⁸ Appadurai, *Modernity at Large*, p. 37.

⁹ Along the lines of Appadurai, Leonhardt uses the term ‘theatrescape’ to designate the worldwide distribution of theater. As in, Zhang, *Chinese Theatre Troupes*, p. 10.

transnational or migration histories, both these chapters open up substantial possibilities for novel approaches in the field.

Janet M. Davis, like Peta and Carey, looks at the transnational movement, but through an entirely different frame of a significant object in history, the tent. Exploring the circus tent as a viable object that represented a circus's constant mobility, tours, and temporariness, she places the transnational canvas tent as "a historically mutable object" which transformed circus into a flexible and highly mobile unit "that could play a new stand everyday". She emphatically notes that American tenting circus has a history closely linked to the "continental expansion, industrialization, incorporation, national consolidation, and the ascendancy of America as a global power" and provides an elaborate analysis of American circus spectatorship and tenting that influenced the circuses in the Global South. Let me share an interesting parallel between the "circus geographies" of the USA and India that Janet provides. Kamala Three Ring Circus, owned by a Keralite entrepreneur Damodaran, was the largest in Asia and the second largest in the world during the 1950s. The expansion of the circus to three ring was modelled on the five ring Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey. Damodaran's daughter Kamala and her husband Mukundan told me that Damodaran used to get circus journals from the USA via international post and many of the modifications were done accordingly. Kamala shared that as part of 'modernising', her father introduced many new circus items like the girls' trapeze and imported make-up material for the performers.¹⁰

As pointed out earlier not all movements are voluntary and there have always been forced shifts by the dominant, causing horrendous violence. Race, ethnicity, caste, and gender figure as fundamental factors in these histories of imposed displacement and migration during the colonial expansions, world wars, civil wars, sectarian violence, and ethnic riots. The histories of the Atlantic slavery or Indian Ocean slave trade have been comprehensively examined by scholars. Similarly extensive work has been done on caste slavery and bonded labor in the South Asian contexts.¹¹ But this area of research is yet to expansively look at how these grand historical events have determined and shaped the destinies of minor beings such as the circus community across the globe.

Robert W. Rydell's chapter in this volume discusses the racist exhibitions of Africans in the early American Wild West shows, World's Fairs, human zoos, and circuses. He tellingly notes that these groups traveled more around the Americas than most of their 'white' American contemporaries. London and Paris, 'modern' urban centers of the 18th, 19th, and early 20th centuries were flourishing with the

¹⁰ Interview with Kamala Damodaran and the late Mukundan, Thalassery, Kerala, India, 28 December 2014; See Nisha P. R.'s *An Archive of Their Own*, p. 53.

¹¹ For instance, Brown, *Tacky's Revolt*; Chatterjee, *Gender, Slavery and Law*.

exhibitions of humans and animals ‘collected’ from the colonies.¹² Clicko’s life story shows that many of these Africans exhibited in the human zoos, ethnological museums, and Wild West shows were also exhibited in colonial circuses. The blurb of the book, *Clicko: The Wild Dancing Bushman* (2009) puts it in market friendly terms,

Clicko (Franz Taibosh) was a star performer of the Ringling Brothers and Barnum & Bailey Circus in the 1920s and 1930s. When he died in 1940, an obituary in the *New York Times* called him ‘the only African bushman ever exhibited in this country’. But it was not known where he really came from, or how he had come to America – where he was often mistaken to be an Australian.¹³

The “African Bushmen”, as the book further details, “were dubbed Pygmies.... Most other members of the troupe seem to have been short-statured Zulu-speakers from Natal. When not touring, Meekin’s Pygmies lived in the urban jungle of King’s Cross in Sydney”.¹⁴ Along with the blatant violence of the exotic gaze, the plight of displacement, the forgotten history, and distortion of the African body come into question. At the same time the resilience of the African performers who survived these racial, cultural, and spatial barriers by finding new possibilities in the alien land, moves one beyond comparison. A significant aberration to cite in this context would be the South Asian circus enterprises. The early circuses owned and managed by South Asians probably had a totally different perception on some of these colonial exhibitions (unlike those owned by the ‘white’ European masters in South Africa, North America, Australia, or Europe). In my research I have not yet come across anything regarding the exhibitions of Africans or indigenous people in the early South Asian circuses. At the same time, many of these circuses in South Asia thrived on the exhibition of physical ‘deformities’ of both humans and animals.

Interestingly, Nilgiri Todas, an indigenous people of South India, were contracted by a circus in the west to exhibit them as “ethnological rarities” in Europe, America, and Australia. Gunnel Cederlof points out how the community came to be known as the “Travelled Toda”.¹⁵ Peta Tait mentions in her chapter about the infamous village of ‘native’ Burmese exhibited in the ethnographic exhibitions in Britain. Ruthlessly chauvinistic, the Burmese Women’s League was upset that the tribal group called Padaung, exhibited as the giraffe-necked women in the British Bertram Mills and German Hegenbeck Wallace circuses was mentioned

¹² Plumb, *The Georgian Menagerie*; Blanchard, Boetsch, and Snoep (eds.), *Human Zoos*.

¹³ Parsons, *Clicko*, Blurb.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, p. 32.

¹⁵ Cederlof, “The Toda Tiger”, p. 70.

as ‘Burmese’ by the British newspapers!¹⁶ Similarly, the Hegenbeck company had organized an exhibition called “Les Malabares” exhibiting people from Malabar, South India, their lives and livelihoods. The exhibition included acrobats, monkey trainers, bamboo climbers, snake charmers, temple dancers, and jugglers from various parts of India.¹⁷ The introduction of Indians for the show was done after John Hegenbeck (brother to Carl Hegenbeck who owned the Hegenbeck company and partially the Hegenbeck-Wallace Circus) visited India in 1885.¹⁸ This exhibition that began in Paris traveled across Europe and America during the mid-19th and early 20th centuries.¹⁹ The transnationality of animal and human bodies in the early circuses is deeply entangled with the violence of the ‘exotic’ and the gaze of the ‘spectacle’. It’s worthwhile mentioning in this context that Carey A. Watt notes that Eugen Sandow’s body was masculinized and exoticized as the ‘strong man’, and the ‘perfect man’: he was “globalizing an idealized white male European body in a colonial context, through spectacular poses he developed, and his near-naked body bathed in white light against a black background”.

Interdisciplinary studies on these appalling racist displays for the pleasure of the white gaze, made possible by colonialism and the slave trade, could open up entirely new questions regarding race, ethnicity, gender, and indigeneity. In the case of animals, of course, the brutal violence of being a caged exhibit has been naturalized by human modernity and its enlightenment sciences to date. Peta Tait notes in her chapter that most of the circuses were adding ‘exotic’ animals during their tours, making use of the global animal trade to their advantage. Many historians have noted that the European love of the ‘exotic’ has had its root in the territorial, political, racial, and environmental imperialism colonialism exercised in many of the colonies. Animal trade from the colonies was one of the most prosperous enterprises for the colonial empire. Animals were shipped and exported for scientific experiments, to be showcased at zoological gardens and parks, and to be stuffed in the museums of Europe – one of the ways in which animals reached the circuses.²⁰ The forced mobility and displacement of animals raise questions on animal rights, bondage, and captivity. Eleonore Rimbault notes in her chapter about the legal ban on the training and performance of wild animals in the Indian circus, a moment

¹⁶ Le Minh Khai, “Circus Problems and the Colonizer-Colonized Convergence in Late Colonial Burma”, <https://leminhkhai.wordpress.com/2015/02/18/circus-problems-and-the-colonizer-colonized-convergence-in-late-colonial-burma/>, Accessed on 11 February 2025.

¹⁷ S. Harikrishnan, “The Unsettling Colonial History of India’s Malabar Exhibited in Human Zoos”, 1 February 2023. <https://caravanmagazine.in/history/the-unsettling-colonial-history-of-india-malabar-exhibited-in-human-zoos>, Accessed on 16 February 2023.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Plumb, *The Georgian Menagerie*.

historically significant with colonial and postcolonial genealogies, that animals reached Indian circuses from all over the world. The ban initiated in 1991 by the Environment Ministry of India became a decade-long legal battle between the circus community and the Indian State. Eleonore argues that the ban brought about shifts in the way animals were conceived in India, and it gave animal rights activists more power in defining the state-endorsed 'care' for animals. The two bans on animals and children became 'death blows' to the Indian circus, with various companies shutting down, and many trying to survive by bringing in artistes from other countries.

My contribution to the volume addresses this historical juncture. Focusing on the transnational migration and mobility of East African acrobats to Indian performing arenas within the framework of Indian Ocean histories, I look at how this movement of African acrobats to India is expediated by various local and global happenings such as legal proscriptions of training and performance of wild animals and children in India, the overthrow of monarchy and establishment of democracy in Nepal, civil unrest, and the mushrooming of circus schools in African nations. These circus schools mostly established by non-governmental organizations (hereafter 'NGOs') based in the Global North propagate the idea of 'social circus'. Social circus is supposedly derived from the ideas of 'New Circus', popular in Europe since the 1960s, and has flourished amongst other categories such as youth circus and community circus. Social circus shares substantial convergence with 'contemporary circus', despite differences in institutional positioning and primary objectives. Conceptually distinct in many ways from the traditional and tented circuses, these circuses are without animals and combine circus skills with a variety of genres like drama, poetry, and dances. And instead of tents they mostly perform in the streets, theaters, or outdoor venues.²¹ Social circus generally has social justice and societal welfare as an agenda. In Europe, Australia, and America, places with a strong background in traditional equestrian circuses, the 'contemporary circus' thrived from the mid twentieth century. In Latin America and Africa, ideas of social circus flourished especially in the 21st century and is chosen as a professional option by thousands of artistes.

The chapters of Alice Demattos Guimaraes and Roy Gomez Cruz analyze the Latin American contexts of social and contemporary circus while Leah Olwen Llewellyn's chapter and mine are connected by the social circus on the African continent. My chapter explores the social, contemporary, and traditional circus practices in Ethiopia, Tanzania, Kenya, India, and Nepal, looking closely at the young generations who have taken up acrobatic performances as a vocation and traveled and performed in countries across continents. Leah Olwen Llewellyn's chapter based on a rich ethnography in Ethiopia narrates how the social transformation

²¹ Infantino, "A Contemporary History of Circus Arts", pp. 42–61.

in Ethiopia is influenced by international agencies, local factors, and national politics; the civil crisis in Ethiopia has complicated the international shows, travel of acrobats, and the visa procedures to the Global North. Both the authors who have done extensive fieldwork with the Ethiopian acrobats touring the global arenas, note that the African transnationals have significantly recast their life worlds with movement and migration seeking out better choices.

It is worthwhile mentioning that although continents apart, the core themes of transnationalism, subalternity, migration, and mobility traverse these four chapters on social and contemporary circuses. Alice Demattos Guimaraes's chapter examines the mobility and migration of circus youths – from city to city and rural to urban – in the connected contexts of Brazil and the rest of Latin America. Alice's chapter notes the transformative power of performance, arguing and investing it with the social circus, while my chapter looks at this transformation as embodied by the subalterns. Leah's chapter notes the "dreams" of the African acrobats while Alice mentions the Latin American youth who "dreams with their eyes open": "the ordinary city" and the social circus opening up a horizon of possibilities for the Latin American acrobats. The transnationalism from "below" discussed by Roy resonates with the idea of the 'subaltern transnational' in my chapter. Roy Gomez Cruz's chapter analyzing Smith's and Guarnizo's ideas of transnationalisms from "above" and "below" examines the global and local contexts with fascinating ethnographies of 'Foro Periplo' and several other contemporary circus endeavors in Guadalajara in Mexico, and the global 'Cirque du Soleil' in Montreal, Canada. The author poses a significant question vital to circus studies: what would contemporary circus mean in a place like Mexico in the Global South and in the Global North. Roy delves into the captivating and perplexing relationship between transnationalisms, 'Mexicanness', and circus representations.

The chapters of Tracy Ying Zhang and Sabine Hanke examine the transnationalism facilitated by the Chinese state and European colonialism respectively. Tracy's chapter is a perceptive account of performance and political diplomacy; how Chinese acrobatics was used for diplomatic purposes in North America including Mexico and Cuba during the latter half of the twentieth century. China's institutionalization of performing arts and acrobatics paved the way for the 'modern Chinese acrobatics' and how political agendas and diplomatic missions of the states have long-lasting consequences on different ethnic groups. Sabine Hanke chronicles the transnational life of Kannan Bombayo from Malabar, South India, who made a name across the continents, performing in major European and American circus companies. Kannan married his Italian girlfriend who was also an acrobat. The fact that Kannan breathed his last aboard a ship crossing the Mediterranean Sea underscores the life of the transnational. As historian Engseng Ho succinctly puts it, it is not where one is born that is significant in the life of a migrant but where they

die.²² Interestingly, in both Portuguese and Spanish, prominent colonial languages, ‘Malabarista’ and ‘Malabarismo’ mean juggler or acrobat. The frequent travel and excellent performance of the Malabar acrobats from the early 20th century seem to have made a mark that for the Spanish and Portuguese speakers, Malabar has been assimilated linguistically to the acrobatics of Malabar. This transnational movement and its closely connected acrobatic histories seem to have been wonderfully captured by the languages.²³

The Subaltern Body

Renowned Indian thinker Gopal Guru tellingly notes how humiliation varyingly existed in cultural, colonial, nationalist, racial, and caste contexts; the inherent inequality is at the heart of modern civilization:

Humiliation is almost endemic to social life that is active basically through asymmetries of intersecting sets of attitudes – arrogance and obeisance, self-respect and servility, and reverence and repulsion.... For example, in the West it is attitude of race that is at the base of humiliation. In the East, it is the notion of untouchability that foregrounds the form and content of humiliation.²⁴

Guru further observes that while the violated groups or individuals are fully aware of the injustice done to them, they often do not have a well-worked-out plan that grants them justice. He adds, “the concept of humiliation can expand the meaning of other concepts such as justice, equality and nationalism”.²⁵ Kenyan political scientist Ali A. Mazrui argues in his lecture, “The Cross of Humiliation” that, “Africans are not necessarily the most brutalized of peoples, but they are almost certainly the most humiliated in modern history.... The blacks remain the worst victims of contempt; though not necessarily the worst casualties of brutality”.²⁶ Film historian

²² Ho, *The Graves of Tarim*, p. 3.

²³ See Nisha P. R.’s *An Archive of Their Own*, pp. 37–38; I am grateful to scholars and friends Manuel Olmedo Gobante, Reyes Lazaro, William Gilcher, and Akiko Umeiro for kindly sharing this insight with me.

²⁴ Guru (ed.), *Humiliation*, p. 1; Guru’s critique of caste humiliation and untouchability involves appraising the mechanism of victimhood of the Indian upper caste nationalist thinkers who were against “racial humiliation but inconsistent over caste humiliation”, p. 4.

²⁵ *Ibid*, p. 19.

²⁶ He further notes that the Native Americans were regarded as “pests for elimination”: “If the Nazis were guilty of a centralized form of genocide, the white immigrants to North America were often guilty of decentralized genocide”. Mazrui, *The African Condition*, pp. 26–27.

Theodore Bhaskaran highlights the stigma faced by the entertainment industry and the major role of caste, “Entertainment industry traditionally has been stigmatized and looked down upon, in Asia; such an attitude was much more accentuated in India because of the rigid stratification of the society on caste basis”.²⁷

Exploring the many facets of humiliation with regard to the circus bodies of the Global South is beyond the scope of this volume. However, subordination that causes humiliation is a significant characteristic with the ‘subaltern’. Ranajit Guha, a founder historian of the Subaltern Studies Collective, pithily notes in his introduction to the collective’s objectives that the word ‘subaltern’, as given in the *Concise Oxford Dictionary* means, “of inferior rank”.²⁸ In his attempt “to interrogate the interrogators” and “writing histories of the unlettered”, Shahid Amin, another member of the Subaltern Studies Collective, points out, “peasants do not write, they are written about”.²⁹ How do we write the histories of the circus subalterns from the Global South from a democratic position? How do we understand a circus body as a site of conflict and resistance? For instance, how do women acrobats reclaim their sexualized, gendered, or demoralized bodies with agency? Race, ethnicity, gender, and subalternity have defined the performing worlds of acrobats and animals from the Global South. The subaltern performing body has historically embodied markers like sexualization and stigma. Exoticization and exhibition of bodies have been a recurring theme. Performing circus animals raises debates on anthropocentrism. The pop culture distinguishes circus from the elite or the classical forms. Let me briefly discuss how these significant themes that form part of the historically connected contexts of various circus cultures are explored by the contributions to this volume.

White supremacy and racism were entrenched in many ways in the early circuses. Peta Tait writes, “A British-owned circus such as Harmston’s reflected the racial divisions of the colonies in that it presented predominantly European performers, even though it was performing to racially diverse audiences”, while Janet M. Davis notes the case of American circuses of the early 20th century as having “horrific consistency of racist mob violence, which all too often culminated with a lynching on Circus Day” and the fleeing of hundreds of Black people from Evansville, USA. My chapter looks at the everyday racial humiliations faced by East African acrobats in the public spaces in India such as streets and shopping malls. On the other hand, in the case of the Kenyan acrobat Shirin Mkwaby, her transnational life has been a means of earning livelihood as well as overcoming social and cultural discrimination and humiliation against same-sex love at home. Leah

²⁷ Bhaskaran, *Trade Unionism*, pp. 1–2.

²⁸ Guha, *Subaltern Studies I*, Preface.

²⁹ Amin, *Event, Memory, Metaphor*, Prologue.

Olwen Llewellyn notes that the Black acrobats from Ethiopia have been migrating for work from the challenging war-torn conditions at home. In Leah's touching terms, the hopes, ambitions, and dreams of Ethiopian acrobats are, "vitalised by art and united by adversity". Robert W. Rydell's chapter looks at the violent racism inflicted on the Africans, captured, enslaved, and exhibited in North America.

The subaltern body and the relegated voices of ethnic minorities are explored in Roy's, Alice's, and Tracy's chapters. Unearthing the voices of Chinese acrobats, Tracy Ying Zhang notes that they are "often erased and undervalued in the public discourses regarding the development of contemporary circus arts in North America". Tracy asks, what would it mean to be Chinese in Mexico, Cuba, or North America, and also a Chinese Mexican in China, pointing out that the Chinese state alienated the Chinese Mexicans from their diplomatic missions and the Chinese performers were not even allowed to mingle with them. In a similar vein, Roy Gomez Cruz writes that the perspectives and lives of the minority contemporary circus groups in Guadalajara, Mexico are totally different from the commodifying global circus company from Canada, Cirque du Soleil. The solidarity, resistance, and marginality of the Mexican performers are examined in Roy's article. Alice Demattos Guimaraes analyses the transformation, social inclusion, and holistic development of youth "at-risk" from Latin American cities "exacerbating social inequality". Various Hispanic identities and the lower-class status of these Latin American youths have contributed to their choosing such a livelihood with the social circus.

As mentioned earlier, exoticization and exhibition of 'bodies of the other' is a lingering theme in many chapters. Like the sexualization of women's bodies, exoticization with notions of 'difference' and 'otherness' of ethnicities and races drew in spectators in large numbers. Sabine Hanke's chapter examines the Orientalized depictions of 'Indianness' performed by the renowned Indian acrobat, Kannan Bombayo, and Renée Bernard, the French performer, both performing in the Bertram Mills Circus in interwar Britain. Both 'Kannan Bombayo' and 'Koringa' were exoticized as to evoke certain notions of the East, Eastern magic, and cultural practices. While Kannan performed with elephants, snakes, and other wild animals to enhance his 'Indianness', Sabine enquires, what notions of sexuality of the 'orient' did Koringa, the 'female Fakir' generate through her crocodile acts? Born as a 'lower' caste in early 20th century Malabar amidst the horrendous caste discriminations such as untouchability, seeking self-respect must have been a driving force of Kannan's mobility and migration.

Author of *Animal Liberation* (1990), Peter Singer has pointed out that speciesism is as violent as racism or sexism.³⁰ Just like the subaltern body of a Black, Dalit,

³⁰ Singer, *Animal Liberation*, p. 6.

Asian, or woman marked with sexualization, caste, or race, the circus opens debates on the animal body marked with anthropocentrism, exoticization, and exhibition. The long cohabitation with animals generates certain stigma for animal tamers/trainers. Examining the human-animal relationship in the Indian circus, Eleonore Rimbault's chapter asks such questions as, "What defines a relation of love, care, and affection between a human being and a non-human animal?", and "How can the expression of emotions be reconciled with the context of human domination that often defines interspecies relations?" The mass culture of the circus and its subaltern humans and animals are historically linked to the 'lowbrow' nature of popular culture.³¹ Circus figures in many cultural imaginations as something "both 'within' and 'outside' culture".³² Arguing along the lines of Frederik Schodt's idea that circus belonged to a subculture and demimonde associated with popular culture and mass entertainment, Carey A. Watt notes that Eugen Sandow who popularized the 'Sandow system' struggled to cast off the shadow of this subculture to achieve respectability.³³ Ethnicity, race, and the inclusion of people with various 'disabilities' and 'diversions', humans cohabitating with animals to their subhuman existence, intermarriages of many genders and ethnicities, women performing half-naked, people of 'lower' castes and communities might have added to the 'low' culture, stigma, and marginality of circus.

Circus Archives of the Global South

The essays in this volume open discussions on the various aspects of circus studies like the traditional itinerant circuses, and the New, contemporary, and social circuses. The primary and secondary sources used by the authors intersect with all these genres and give a glimpse into the wide uncharted archives of circus studies from the Global South. The contemporary and social circuses discussed in this book depend largely on memories and memorabilia with extensive ethnographies. The development of the 'New Circus' (also known as 'cirque nouveau') ideas are often traced back to the Global North as early as the 1960s. The archival data on equestrian circuses often dates back two centuries or more. These massive histories are mapped through colonial records, memoirs, personal collections, and newspaper archives. It

³¹ Stuart Hall, one of the early proponents of popular culture studies, notes how the culture of the masses was considered lowbrow by elites and classicists when it was introduced. Stuart Hall, "Cultural Studies' Bright Book of Life: Richard Hoggart's 'The Uses of Literacy'", 2017, <https://www.firstofthemonth.org/cultural-studies-bright-book-of-life-richard-hoggarts-the-uses-of-literacy/>, Accessed on 11 September 2024.

³² Bouissac, *Circus and Culture*, pp. 6–7.

³³ Schodt, *Professor Risley*, pp. 38–39.

is interesting to note here that many of the official archives of circus histories of the Global South are in the Global North. Archival records of the colonial pasts of the Global South, housed in the Global North repositories significantly throw light on the historical connections but also the politics of colonialism, power, and possession.

Leah Olwen Llewellyn analyzes the development of social circus in Ethiopia through interviews and participant-observation techniques in various cities such as Addis Ababa, Ankober, Debre Berhan in Ethiopia and Amsterdam and London in Europe. The everyday lives of these acrobats constituted a major part of Leah's archive. Roy Gomez Cruz collected the memories and memorabilia from various Guadalajara-based contemporary circus companies in Mexico like the Cirko Alebrije, Circo Dragon, and Les Cabaret Capricho. Roy also traveled and interviewed performers and practitioners in Cirque du Soleil and did extensive ethnographic work in Quebec and Montreal in Canada. In Alice Demattos Guimaraes' chapter, social media form a significant part of the archive. The initial fieldwork was conducted through WhatsApp video calls and Zoom meetings as Alice's chapter was being prepared during the Covid-19 shutdowns. In the later stages the author met with performers and trainers in person in Rio de Janeiro, Salvador, and Sao Paulo in Brazil, and Bogota in Colombia, and Caracas in Venezuela.

Transnational history archives often consist of multi-lingual sources. Tracy Ying Zhang's archives consist of personal memories, program booklets, and newsletters and newspapers in Spanish, Chinese, and English. Tracy spent months researching at the Wuhan Acrobatic Troupe Archive, Wuhan in China. Tracy's and my work touch upon both traditional equestrian circuses, and contemporary and social circuses. I explore the social circus practiced by acrobats from Kenya, Tanzania, and Ethiopia through extensive oral histories of the Indian Ocean regions. Following the African acrobats from South India, I visited the cities they belonged to and worked in, meeting with their trainers, colleagues, friends, and family. I traveled to meet them in Malmo, Qatar, Johannesburg, Dar es Salaam, Nairobi, Dallas, New York, Aarhus, Kampala, and Addis Ababa. In India, I collected memories from artistes and managers in Bangalore, Chennai, Delhi, Ahmadabad, and Jaipur in various performing arenas including the itinerant circuses, the history of which goes back a century and a half.

Examining the papers of William F. Cody, the hunter and showman popularly known as Buffalo Bill, Robert W. Rydell connects the racialized histories of Wild West shows, human zoos, ethnological museums, World's Fairs, and circuses prodding us to think anew the categories such as 'circus', 'fair', 'vaudeville', variety shows', 'theater', 'zoo', 'amusement parks', or 'museum'.³⁴ His archive is not

³⁴ Interestingly, although not a traditional circus, Buffalo Bill's Wild West Shows were also known as the Buffalo Bill circus. Blanchard, Boetsch, and Snoep (eds.), *Human Zoos*.

a fairground archive or circus museum dedicated entirely to circus histories. On the other hand, Sabine Hanke's archival sources are from the National Fairground and Circus Archive, Sheffield, UK exclusively dedicated to histories of the circus and fairground shows. Sabine also uses collections of newspapers and archival materials in the Victoria and Albert Archives, London. It is interesting that these archives hold materials on Kannan's life, a well-known South Asian acrobat.

Janet Davis explores the vast collection of 'Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers' in the Library of Congress at Washington D.C., for charting such grand histories like the "birth of the modern circus", "antebellum era", or the "gilded age" of the tenting circuses while skillfully exploring the subaltern voices of segregation experiences and brutal violence faced by Black people who were allowed in the American circuses only as audience, to sit in the "pit". Carey Watt handles plenty of newspaper sources to trace the tours of Eugen Sandow. The materials Carey has gathered generate a new connection that Sandow established an itinerant circus company. Fascinating links of these two genres of physical cultures emerge from these resources.

To weave a history of the long tours of 19th and early 20th century circuses to India and Southeast Asia, Peta Tait makes use of both unpublished private collections like Mark St. Leon's personal collections and other unpublished manuscripts along with official archival sources at the Illinois State University and the University of California, Santa Barbara. The archives of circus histories in the Global South do not just remain in the official archives of universities and repositories of the Global North, but also with personal collections and private papers of circus families and individual collectors.

Can the animal speak? Beyond the human voices, is it possible to write histories from an animal perspective? The human-animal relationship explored by Eleonore Rimbault raises complicated questions on wildlife, captivity, domestication, bonding, suffering, and the subjectivity of animals. The ban on circus animals in India and its aftermath is explored through an analysis of legal reports, notices, and documents. Circus program booklets, novels, films, images, videos, books, articles, and memories of animal trainers, owners, and performers constitute both primary and secondary sources. The complex archives of animals that circus historians deal with often consist of animals' moments of resistance and rebellion, sense of freedom and choices of bonding, expressions of fear, humiliation, and trust, not to say, the understanding and unearthing of which is a herculean task.

The three important themes discussed above synchronize the basic thoughts and matters of this volume, and I have tried to draw the reader's attention to the overarching concern of this book – the circus bodies and histories from/on the Global South. Let me conclude with a small anecdote that lays bare the dilemmas

about the Global South described in the memoir of the Italian circus veteran Ottavio Canestrelli (1896–1977):

We began our long trip to Penang, Malaysia, by taking a train from Baghdad to Basra, where we stayed the night so we could see the market the next day. We saw a lot of unusual and interesting things there, including many different kinds of beggars who moved up and down the streets of the market. There was one man with iron balls hanging from his body with prongs poked into his skin, and another man who was pulling a boy in a small wagon by cords hooked into the skin of his back. There was also a man buried in the ground up to his chin, and another who was hitting himself with chains.³⁵

Ottavio Canestrelli's narration accompanies a photograph taken by him and dated 1927, Basra, Iraq, with a caption, "the man with the balls hooked into the skin begging for money".³⁶ Anyone familiar with South India, especially the Tamil culture, should instantly recognize this 'performance' as part of *Kavadi*,³⁷ a religious ceremony. Interestingly, this image appears in the chapter "The Far East", just after the Baghdad segment, with the opening lines mentioning the next destinations as Malaysia and India. If the performance in the image was sited in a Southeast Asian region such as Malaysia, where Tamils have been migrating for centuries, it could have been more fathomable. Anyway, the gaffe is forgettable since it has taken several decades and three generations in the Canestrelli family for the manuscript of this memoir to reach the printer as stated by the grandson Ottavio Gesmundo who is credited as the co-author.

What interests me is not just the obvious Orientalist gaze scenario in which senior or junior Canestrelli conflate entirely different geographies and cultures of the 'other'. The compelling question is how a ritualistic act addressing the divine and the other world is transmogrified as a performance intended for everyday materialistic gain. This shows why perspectives from the Global South are much needed in the circus histories and theories. The key focus of this book is those complex genealogies of bodies from the Global South who have chosen the vocation of the circus performer: the intricate past and present of the circus bodies from the Global South – human and nonhuman – hitherto uncharted in circus studies. Raising new outlooks and evaluations in circus studies, it is hoped that the essays in

³⁵ Canestrelli and Gesmundo, *The Grand Gypsy*, p. 80.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ *Kavadi* is a profoundly religious ceremonial offering in which devotees of Lord Murugan pray with skewer piercings and piercings of the skin, tongue, or cheeks during festivals like *Thaipusam*. Begging for alms is also an essential practice of *Kavadi*. It is clear from the image that the performer and the men around him are wearing the typical South Indian loin cloth, *mundu*, and the architecture of the majestic wall in the background is also quintessentially South Indian.

the volume with global and regional connections will prompt the readers to think through the lives of animals and humans performing around the world.

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