

## **‘Dance in Colonial Human Exhibits: A History of Conscious Forgetting’ - Report on keynote by Dr. Prarthana Purkayastha**

As the delegates sat waiting for the first keynote of the Dance in the Age of Forgetfulness conference a woman dressed in a long pale yellow skirt, an oversized dark blue suit jacket, an orange scarf, a black beanie hat and gloves on each hand entered the space. Holding a red suitcase, Prarthana Purkayastha slowly took her position in the space ready to deliver the keynote. On the screen behind her was a collection of grainy black and white images depicting various scenes, including (in the top right hand corner) a dancer standing on a decorative rug, holding her skirt away from her body with her right hand and the other holding a scarf, which lay low over her eyes, out to her left.

As Prarthana began we learnt that these images were documented from an installation held at Battersea Park in 1885, where ‘natives’ were sent over from India and forced to partake in this ‘living Indian village’<sup>1</sup>. It is this image and this particular female in the sketched image that formed the core of Prarthana’s keynote, exploring what these forgotten bodies tell us about race relations and asking why we remember and, more significantly, why do we forget? The little information available about this 1885 installation reveals how certain events in history are eradicated, allowed to be forgotten or consciously not remembered. This report is a reflection of my collected notes and remembering of this keynote, exploring key points and revising the issues raised.

To begin, Prarthana looked at the ways in which society remembers, through memorials or commemorations, demonstrating our ability to remember and our tendency to celebrate the act of remembering. However, it is important to question what is remembered and what events are selected to be forgotten. In addition to this, the issue is raised of who does the remembering (and forgetting) was addressed, citing the history curriculum in schools, the content of which is dictated by the government. Within this example alone, specific events from history are chosen to be remembered, recollected and reflected upon, very specifically streamlined to explore only what those doing the remembering wish to keep remembered. Therefore choosing to forget other views, experience and aspects of these events.

By unearthing detail regarding the nautch dancers from 1885, Prarthana was lead to four different reflections in relation to the conference focus. The first reflection concerns collective national forgetting, exploring the ways in which, as a nation, some events overtake our view of history and overshadow, or even seem to erase, previous events, especially in British colonial history. An example given was the allies’ victory in the World War and how, due to this ‘success’, all before it is seemingly forgotten or faded.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://sdr-uk.org/events/dance-in-the-age-of-forgetfulness/>

This ability to pick and choose what is forgotten and how extensively and permanently this is done is highly questionable, but rarely questioned.

The second reflection focused on the national state of forgetfulness, how “many things are forgotten [or we have] forgotten many things”<sup>2</sup>. The reconstruction of the history of marginalised groups has led to omissions of detail, again raising the question of who is remembering and who is choosing what to forget. The third reflection surveyed forgetfulness and archiving, exploring how dance might be viewed as a trace of what has gone before, a reflection of something that once was. This could lead us to consider how dance is documented in order for it to be traced, such as the sketched image of the nautch dancer.

The final reflection explored the language of disremembering, reflecting upon the difference between forgetting as a verb and forgetfulness as a dimension. It was suggested that forgetfulness could be considered as a failure to remember and invites a question of conscious activity: how do we recollect or forget the past? Coming to the end of her spoken delivery, Prarthana concluded by reciting the poem ‘Let me not Forget’ by Rabindranath Tagore, which finishes with the repeated lines,

---let me not forget for a moment,  
let me carry the pangs of this sorrow in my dreams  
and in my wakeful hours<sup>3</sup>

After each reflection, Prarthana removed an item of clothing, shedding her oppressive layers until she similarly reflected the female dancer in the image on the screen. Moving into the centre of the space, Prarthana picked up the edge of her skirt and the end of her scarf, and took up the position held by the preserved nautch dancer. Moving slowly and deliberately in a circular motion on the spot, Prarthana appeared to immortalise the female from the still image, commemorating her and her role in history, bringing attention to her experience.

The keynote was then responded to by Dr 'Funmi Adewole, who considered what could now be done in response to the points raised by Prarthana, asking, “if we have forgotten and can’t remember, what do we do?”<sup>4</sup>. From this ‘Funmi acknowledged the specific roles needed to be filled in order to remember what’s gone wrong in the past and work to change it. For example, gatekeepers and programmers were highlighted as being in a position of privilege, with a particular role to offer opportunities to a diverse range of performers. In addition, practitioners themselves have a lens of responsibility, acknowledging that attitude plays an important role in shaping the (potential) dance landscape. Additionally, ‘Funmi mentioned Exhibit B, a 2014 exhibition held at the Barbican, which was “inspired by

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<sup>2</sup> Prarthana, 2018, personal conference notes

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.poemhunter.com/poem/let-me-not-forget/>

<sup>4</sup> Adewole, 2018, personal conference notes

the 19th-century phenomenon of “human zoos”, where African tribespeople would stand on display for European audiences to look at”.<sup>5</sup> This exhibition, ‘Funmi identified, highlights and emphasises the importance of who ‘does’ the remembering and raises questions regarding the handling of collective memories.

Setting tone for the conference, this keynote carefully outlined a number of significant issues regarding forgetfulness, not singularly linked to dance alone, but drawing out wider societal issues, linked to neo-liberalism. Now reflecting on the keynote with hindsight, I can see how Prarthana’s creative delivery and important considerations encompassed the breadth of matters to be addressed during the remainder of the conference and triggered engaging discussions over the subsequent days regarding forgetting, remembering, revisiting the past and changing the path for the future.

Kathryn Stamp

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2014/sep/05/exhibit-b-is-the-human-zoo-racist-the-performers-respond>