No tan lejos del mundanal ruido: La estética y la política de la 'habilidad' en los actos circenses entre humanos y animales no humanos en la Bengala colonial (finales del siglo XIX a principios del siglo XX)*

Not So Far from the Madding Crowd: The Aesthetics and Politics of 'Skill' in Human-Nonhuman Animal Circus Acts in Colonial Bengal (Late 19th to Early 20th Century) // Não tão longe da multidão enlouquecida: A estética e a política da "habilidade" em atos circenses entre humanos e animais não humanos na Bengala colonial (final do século XIX ao início do século XX).

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* **Artículo de reflexión**

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Resumen

En este artículo, analizo una amplia variedad de literatura y materiales circenses (archivos, efímeros visuales, carteles, panfletos, tradiciones circenses y ficción) que documentan el recorrido del Gran Circo de Bengala en relación con los circos itinerantes del siglo XIX y principios del siglo XX, los cuales seguían rutas transnacionales. Al centrarme en la representación de tres especies animales específicas, de relevancia histórica, y en su relación con los humanos, exploro su visualización y encuentro como eventos corpóreos, junto con las políticas culturales asociadas. Mi objetivo es desentrañar las intersecciones antropomórficas y zoomórficas que intervienen en la comprensión del cuerpo. Este análisis se inscribe en el contexto de la modernidad colonial en la India, en contraste con las ideas eurocéntricas, estructuradas a partir de binarios como "salvaje" frente a "domesticado" o "humano" frente a "no humano," las cuales tienden a ser oscurecidas por las (in)articulaciones viscerales de la "habilidad" y la "virtuosidad" como conceptos institucionalizados.

Palabras clave

Humano-no humano, corporeidad, habilidad, capital animal, entrenamiento, circo, India colonial

Abstract

In this article, I examine a range of circus literature and materials (archives, visual ephemera, posters, handbills, circus lore, and fiction that map The Great Bengal Circus in relation to traveling circuses in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, which followed transnational routes. By focusing on the modality of three specific and historically important animal species and their relationship with humans, their visualization and encounter as fleshly events, and the related cultural politics, I seek to unpack the anthropomorphic and zoomorphic entanglements in understanding the body. I situate this analysis within the context of colonial modernity in India, contrasting it with Eurocentric ideas (framed through binaries such as "wild" vs. "tame" or "human" vs "non-human") that the visceral (in)articulations of "skill" and "virtuosity" as institutionalized concepts obfuscate.

Keywords

Human-nonhuman animal, embodiment, skill, animal capital, training, circus, colonial India

Resumo

Neste artigo, examino uma ampla variedade de literatura e materiais circenses (arquivos, coisas efêmeras visuais, cartazes, panfletos, tradições circenses e ficção) que documentam a jornada do Grande Circo de Bengala em relação aos circos itinerantes do século XIX e início. Séculos XX. XX, que seguiu rotas transnacionais. Ao concentrar-me na representação de três espécies animais específicas e historicamente relevantes e na sua relação com os humanos, exploro a sua visão e encontro como eventos corporais, juntamente com as políticas culturais associadas. Meu objetivo é desvendar as intersecções antropomórficas e zoomórficas que intervêm na compreensão do corpo. Esta análise inscreve-se no contexto da modernidade colonial na Índia, em contraste com as ideias eurocêntricas, estruturadas a partir de binários como "selvagem" versus "domesticado" ou "humano" versus "não humano", que tendem a ser obscurecidos pela visão visceral. (in)articulações de "habilidade" e "virtuosismo" como conceitos institucionalizados.

Palavras-chave

Humano-não-humano, corporeidade, habilidade, capital animal, treinamento, circo, Índia colonial

Introduction: The human-non-human animal interface of modern circus as a colonial popular entertainment.

In trying to approach entertainment that involves human-animal interactions, one must negotiate the question, "What constitutes the basis of embodiment of human and non-human animal interactions?" By using the terms human and non-human animals, I put forth a well-established idea in the historiography of animal studies. The core concept of such a formulation is that humans and "other" animate beings cohabit through a dynamic interplay of mutual dependence and conflict, forming an "interspecies relationship" (Tsing, 2012, p.141). Representing the animal through empathy is a complex idea, given that experience and articulation of this experience are grounded in the inherently anthropocentric nature of discourse. I see a critical solipsism in the question, "what does looking at an animal entail? And, in the context of human-animal relations, what does touching an animal signify?"[2] In this, I contend with Derrida (2002), who argues that the idea of the animal is constituted by the human and, in turn, defines itself through its difference from this human-centric discourse. This Derridian idiom points to the dominant Eurocentric, Western understanding of the human, which presupposes a categorical distinction between the human body and that of the animal. This notion finds its roots in the Greco-Roman philosophical tradition, later assimilated into Christian theological discourse. Within Indic traditions, however, animal bodies are seen as extensions of human bodies in legal texts. The permeability of bodies renders the human and the animal, in Indic traditions, an entangled moral, ethical, and socio-religious concept different from the conception of the European Enlightenment (Gutiérrez, 2018).

The conceptual scope of this article is multi-layered and complex, engaging with colonial perspectives on the non-white human "other" and nonhuman animals, with precolonial Indic views of these, and the study of the embodiment of human and non-human animal relations. I traverse beyond a temporal framework to explore how dominant colonial paradigms reconfigured and appropriated existing Indic human-non-human subjectivities, focusing on these two discourses in the political and cultural realm. I explore how the emergence of the circus in colonial India became an apt site to provide a contact zone between colonial and Indic paradigms of the species boundary between human and nonhuman animals.

In this regard, a study of human-non-human animal acts in the traveling circus companies between Europe and its colonies requires critical attention in two significant areas: (a) situating the critical formulation of the human-nonhuman while conceptualizing circus acts within the framework of animal mobility and displacement, as commercialized through networks of hunting, poaching, and trading, conservation initiatives, and zoo captivity; and (b) examining the embodied history of circus acts involving animals and the aesthetics of designing performances through them.

Notably, the colonial discourse of evolutionary science and anatomy significantly influenced the circus (Rothfels 2002; Gruen 2014). With the emergence of scientific and anthropological studies of various curiosities involving the body, circus acts became the visual sphere where the limitations on body movements and the extent of their choreography wereeconomized (Assael 2005; Tait 2016). Colonial entertainment thrived on circuses involving traveling menageries exhibiting acts that demonstrated "the most valuable evidence of the superiority of man over animals" (Le Roux & Garnier, 1890, p. 133). The colonial staging of human-nonhuman animal acts metonymized animals within the cultural symbolism of empire while also creating a narrative of taming the wild through discipline and training, thus regulating and controlling animal

2 For Derrida (2002), the idea of the animal is philosophically situated by him as something which is constituted by the human and constitutes itself in difference from this human-centric discourse. He de-constructively approaches this formulation by asking what it might mean to reconfigure the human-animal divide by being looked at and addressed by the animal in its silent being.

behavior through the registers of mastery and captivity. Nigel Rothfels, in *Savages and Beasts* (2002), notes how the zoological garden became an interesting nexus of scientific education and entertainment, moving from the aggrandized private ownership model to a public space of education and exhibition of wild and exotic animals. However, Rothfels also cautions against a progressivist reading of this change from private menageries to public zoos and conservation parks: "It is clear that modern Western zoological gardens, from the nineteenth century to today, often act out quite explicitly the political, imperial, or educational claims of the current elites" (p. 39).

It is precisely in this historicity of the colonial knowledge and desire to control the animal, and even in scientific discourse within a continuum of evolutionary and hierarchical order, that I find Derrida's interrogation into the naming of the animal particularly significant. The animal addressed within an "anthropo-theomorphic reappropriation" (Derrida, 2002, p. 387) is relevant to understanding the embodiment of colonial modernity within human-nonhuman animal acts in a South-Asian context. In his characteristic fashion, Derrida goes on to say that

> They neither wanted nor had the capacity to draw any systematic consequence from the fact that an animal could, facing them, look at them, clothed or naked, and in a word, without a word, address them. They have taken no account of the fact that what they call animal could look at them and address them from down there, from a wholly other origin. (p. 382)

Problematizing the visualization of colonial documents and popular visual cultures on the animal helps us interrogate the consigning of the animal as capital, within both material and immaterial facets of circus performance within colonial modernity. The animals formed active material in the fabric of capital flow. As the animal becomes inscribed by visual and textual signs in performance, a mimetic focus on the aesthetic visualization of its species gains significance. The foundation of this visualization of species differences in the humanist approach to care, training, and harnessing became increasingly grafted to the biopower of animal life, which creates capital. An alternate framework of modernity forms the contextual basis of situating the human and nonhuman animals as subjects, historically permeating the embodiment of each other, which is very unique to the South Asian context (Chakrabarty, 2000, Guha, 1997). In this latter context, folklore from Indic socio-religious oral and textual traditions becomes significant sources. The Buddhist Pali Jātakas[3] known as *Jātakaṭṭhakathā* contains stories in which animals speak to humans, often critiquing the anthropocentric language as treacherous, insincere and full of slippages (Ohnuma, 2017, p. 42). These textual traditions suggest a critical quotidian and experiential embodiment of the moral agency of human and nonhuman animals as multispecies alliances that ontologically existed through recognition and misrecognition of the dynamics of interspecies relationships. While Buddhist doctrine has a hierarchy of moral agency and separation of the domain of the human and the nonhuman, these tales bring a certain environmental and ecological understanding of human and nonhuman interactions to bear on moral attitudes. In doing so, the animal voices in the narrative speak through their animality toward human abuse, exemplified in acts of hunting, poaching, and meat-eating. An example that illustrates the quotidian experience within the ritual structure of animal sacrifice is a story in the Matakabhatta Jātakā. The voice of the sacrificial goat, offering a critique of animal killing by the Brahmin in front of a crowd, becomes instrumental in bringing about a transformation in him. The goat speaks of the finitude of its suffering and pain, as it would be released

3 The Pali Jātakās are part of a tradition of Buddhist literature, that speak of the previous births of Gautama Buddha, accounting in detail the various life paths on the way to attain Buddhahood. In these textual traditions, these lives take the form of both human and nonhuman animal existence of the Boddhisattvas in the cycle of rebirth. They also demonstrate through their illustrative stories filled with nonhuman animals, moral attitudes and teachings central to Buddhism. I would like to thank Sagnik Saha, a peer and scholar in Ancient Indian History, for his valuable insights on historiography of nonhuman animals in Buddhist texts and traditions.

from the cycle of rebirth, while the Brahmin through his actions would now experience the exact suffering and pain of nonhuman animal life under human abuse in his future lives (Ohnuma, 2017, p. 42-43).

Circus acts instrumentalized the colonial appropriation of the Darwinian model in their curation of human-nonhuman animal relationship during the colonial period. Circus became a site of public observation, fueling a curiosity about the exotic other and sometimes, a means to know this othered body of the staged human as well as nonhuman animal. Being a form of public entertainment, it exploited the effects of wonder, astonishment, and anticipation to indulge joyous satisfaction in acts that would otherwise be unimagined. Circus in the colonial period masked the racial, gendered, and class politics of its aesthetic regime through methods of training and disciplining the wild and brute elements of nonhuman animals. The logic of accumulation of sources of the performative form of circus in colonial India remains tied to the logic of colonial archive. This is where I see the critical conundrum lies. The same conceptual paradigm that formulates the embodied experience of the human and nonhuman animal must look to a broader Indic ethology of human-animal relationships from the Vedic period to the period of colonization.

In the following section, I seek to explore this complexity by critically examinig at specific animals and their emergence as both economic and symbolic capital within colonial traffic, as well as the relationship of these processes with the precolonial order in the South Asian *milieu*. While an exhaustive study is beyond the scope of this paper, three animal species - *elephants, horses* and *big cats* - and their movement within the colonial sphere as material and symbolic entities become crucial. A subsequent conversation around representation and labor of human-nonhuman animal networks, in the colonial regime of work and play and in relation to the precolonial conceptions of the same, is of much relevance. Within the field of circus studies and its intersection with animal studies, I believe that the Indic ethology of these animals presents reasonable ground to critically evaluate the change in their care. Through these three animal modalities, I argue that modern circus became an instrument of colonial power that sought to govern bodies, both human and nonhuman. Observing, training, and taming certain animals through the institutions of public entertainment created a change in the existing order of human-nonhuman animal marked by permeability and entanglement. This, however, does not suggest that the precolonial Indic domain of human-nonhuman animal was idyllic and pastoral. While a certain conflict may be traced with the rise of agrarian economy, animals nonetheless formed an integral part of understanding the embodied structures of human kinship (Gutiérrez, 2018, p. 474).

The story of Jumbo and other elephants: Nonhuman animal mobility in circus

To unpack the "closure" of the life and experience of elephants in human articulations within the colonial period, I quote the following anecdote. This anecdote is from juvenile literature by Bonny Worth (2001) and illustrated by Christopher Santoro, on Jumbo, the most famed circus elephant in the world. Describing the tragic accident when Jumbo was hit by a train, the narrator says,

> People around the world mourned the loss of the great elephant. *Did P.T Barnum mourn? In his own way, perhaps*. He certainly mourned the loss of Jumbo's income. Barnum quickly arranged to have Jumbo stuffed. In fact, it was not long before he was touring with two jumbos- the stuffed hide and the mounted skeleton. The great elephant turned to be worth more dead than he had been alive. (p. 44)

The fictional passage elucidates how animals feature in Euro-American discourse and how their livingness is extracted

even in their death. The simultaneity of mourning and commodification signals the forked and dual nature of what might be called animal modernity. As Susan Nance argues,

> …modern subjectivities require that citizens have the ability to tolerate a ponderous and apparently uncomfortable alienation from the livingness of most species while they materially benefit from efforts to destroy nonhuman animals' autonomy through confinement and other management practices that reshape animals into expressions of human culture and capital. (Nance, 2015, p. 4)

Jumbo, an African elephant, was traded to Paris and subsequently taken to the London Zoological Society from his place of birth, French-administered Sudan, in the 1860s. The exhibition of Jumbo in the zoological garden sought to create a certain effect of wonder, curiosity, and magnificence through the retelling and circulation of his story which subverted the rampant violence in the animal and ivory trades. Jumbo became an animal celebrity, part of the consumer culture of touring menageries, public pets, and novelty species. The zoo had emerged as a space where humans and animals met through the economy of display and engendered a way of knowing about entities from "other" eco-cultural spheres. Such exhibiting of the exotic generated visual recognition, curiosity, and wonder that had the effect of alienating animals and depriving them from agency. Subsequently, Jumbo's transatlantic migration to become part of P.T Barnum and Bailey's circus in North America, designated as "The Greatest Show on Earth," substituted engagement through public institutions with a free market sojourn into private enterprise. The transatlantic economy of Jumbo's celebrity status now hinged on the privatization of mass human consumption[4]. It even drew flak from the British press who lamented and critiqued this business deal, as a devaluation of the prosperity the British felt having followed Jumbo's rise to fame as a great sentient being. *Reynold's Newspaper* duly noted on February 26, 1882: "The poor brute" did not want to go. "Having lived so long in his present abode, he naturally objects to going further, with the possibility of faring worse" (Cited in Nance, 2015, p. 23).

It is here that I turn towards how the colonial interest and control of Jumbo informed the South Asian public sphere. While the exploitation of elephants for human use has been recorded in Indian societies since the ancient period, the practice of elephant care and use enjoyed a remarkable transformation, involving differing nomenclatures of care, control, and captivity.

In looking at circus acts involving animals in colonial India, one must also consider the racial economy of the gaze upon human bodies. In colonial storytelling, one finds prominent idioms characterizing native people in animal terms.[5] This form of textual mimesis masks a more insidious management of animals, of creating control of non-human animality through an epistemological and biopolitical framework that harnesses animals within regimes of industrial labor.[6] Such a colonial economy which regulates the biosphere through an-

4 A giant statue of Jumbo was erected at the west entrance to the city of St. Thomas, Ontario, the city where he met with an accident on a railway track and died subsequently. The edifice memorializes this well-known animal, the circumstances of whose life was marked by the racializing and orientalising gaze. See Sethna 2017, p.42.

5 There are a range of texts which represent and name non-white human others as animal within colonial discourse. While a growing body of scientific studies in the intersections of race and eugenics came out of social Darwinism, literary works abounded with such references. Examples include works by Rudyard Kipling, the scientific writings of John Kipling, works by H.H Risley, and more. For critical works on this phenomenon, see Fanon, 2008; Roy, 1998; and Pandian, 2008.

6 While the idea of representing native and indigenous people through animal metaphors or qualities has been prominent in imperial writings, what also needs critical assessment are the material causes of such inscriptions. A separation of the material and symbolic circulation of animals within the hegemonic domain of industrial capitalism is complex. Difference as a basis of signifying the human and nonhuman animal was bound to the racial economy of how animals became part of capital flow. Such a practice was dominantly Eurocentric and white, and came to inform the epistemological framework of human and nonhuman animal relations. This in turn hinged on the biopolitics of the management of native population of the colony – indigenous human and nonhuman animals – within the economy of the European colonisers. See Woolfe (2003) and Bourdieu (1993).

thropocentric principles is represented in the works of Rudyard Kipling:

> They [the working animals of the army] obey, as the men do. Mule, horse, elephant, or bullock, he obeys his driver, and the driver his sergeant, and the sergeant his lieutenant, and the lieutenant his captain, and the captain his major, and the major his colonel, and the colonel his brigadier commanding three regiments, and the brigadier the general, who obeys the Viceroy, who is the servant of the Empress. Thus it is done. (Kipling, 1996, pp. 56-57).

A distinct vocabulary articulated the orientalizing gaze on colonized indigenous people, reflecting a need to control and regulate the behavior of such populations through the hierarchy of colonial administration.[7] A significant example is the Criminal Tribes Act of 1871, which criminalized the activities springing from the so-called brutish, inferior, and underdeveloped nature of the Kallar watchmen and chieftains in Southern India, who the Act described as akin to untutored wild animals (Pandian 2008). In this context, while an imperial discourse of human-nonhuman-animal relations began to be formalized within the scientific community, there was also a parallel construction of the idea of animals in captivity, which served as both a means of study and as a form of care.

By contrast, narratives that survive in local expressions embedded in the animistic patterns of tribal life interpret animality through a hierarchical, anthropomorphic perspective. This approach is notably a culturally appropriated manifestation within the Hindu Vedic pantheon of animals through a hierarchical anthropomorphic gaze. The Buddhist Pali Jātakas also present a perspective in which animals are situated within a moral order, simultaneously embodying their animate materialities and speaking with voices that at times refuse to read past real animal positionalities.[8]

To situate the discourse of capture and training as biopolitics through and on animal life, within the colonial sphere, it is important to consider the human-nonhuman animal relations through colonial institutions and practices that informed each other. The deployment of native hunting practices and the use of local knowledge, to acquire, capture, and trade animals for industrial labor coincided with the rise of the circus as a form of public entertainment. Trading of animals, especially elephants, became frequent among animal trading firms and circus companies that invested in procuring these big animals for display. Ram Brahma Sanyal emerged as an important figure in the functioning of the Zoological Garden in Calcutta, which was founded in 1875[9] and modeled with objectives similar to European zoos, in which animals in captivity were

7 An Italian physicist, Cesare Lombroso, in his work, "Natural History of the Criminal" characterized innate delinquency to the outlines of a brutish and retrogressive physiognomy - apish arms and jutting jaws, noses hooked like birds of prey, and so on. Within criminal anthropology, the idea of atavism associated with animality was gaining prominence, as was evident in the legal documents and scientific literature of the late Victorian period. For more see Pandian, 2008.

8 Within the Vedic forms of human-nonhuman relations, the totemic notion of certain animals made its way into Hindu pantheon and iconography, associating certain animals with Vedic deities. The animals were anthropomorphized as well as theo-morphized to bear traits and qualities in association with Vedic deities. Thus, the elephant is looked upon in Hindu societies as related to the deity Ganesha who is an elephant-headed god, embodying wisdom and auspiciousness. Similarly, the lion and tiger are associated with the Goddess Durga, a female deity representing the maternal power of good over evil forces. Each of these associations has a history of acculturation and then re-culturation within the Hindu pantheon, and reflects the hierarchical nature of the Vedic Hindu ideology. Pali Jātakas no 72, *Sīlavanāga Jātaka* tells the story of a white elephant who saves a man from getting lost in the wilderness before being ultimately killed by the same man for ivory. This presents, within the structure of a fable, the gruesome presence of man as an exploitative beast. While the animal is his victim, the animal also serves to offer a point of critique in that animal agency exposes human folly, and blurs the doctrinal realm in religious texts in which the animal is usually relegated as inferior. See Ohnuma, 2017.

9 Ram Brahma Sanyal was a pioneering zoologist and the first superintendent of the Zoological Garden in Calcutta. His publications on captive animals, and breeding Sumatran rhinoceros as a specimen of captive breeding and management of animals. Within the colonial economy of capturing animals for scientific enquiry, Sanyal formed an important native Indian figure, and his works became crucial for the British administration of the zoo in Calcutta.

observed, and acclimatization and breeding of animals, with a focus on indigenous breeds, were primary objectives. Sanyal's work, *A Handbook of Animals in Captivity in Lower Bengal* (1882) is an important document focused on understanding the habits of animals in captivity through daily observation and record-keeping. Sanyal was a local man, educated and trained in European methods, whose publications circulated widely and who lectured across the country. A significant aspect of Rambrahma's work also lay in the study of captive animals and their breeding in controlled settings. He also mentions that certain animals were traded into circuses when their management of them became difficult in zoos. It is important to note that the idea of training animals in circuses was where the imperial discourse of mastery and control over animals was at its helm at the animal training in circuses. This was characteristic of the British policy to use the clerical and intellectual labor of the native population within the management of colonial institutions. In his writings, which were published in the 1950s, James Williams, a veteran of the Bombay Burmah Trading Corporation, noted that "he learned about elephants not from his fellow officers in the company—most of whom he suggested were drunkards—or from colonial writings, but from his oozies." (Saha, 2021, p. 915). He compared the oozies, native Burmese animal handlers and carers, and their elephants in three areas: their life cycles, particularly around adolescence and musth; their temperaments, including the degrees to which they were docile, dangerous, and uncontrollable when provoked; and their addictions, as both shared an addiction to opium. The close relationship between oozie and elephant is reflected in some of the photographs in Williams' memoir, *Elephant Bill*. The caption to one of the photographs describes the oozie as "almost part" of his elephant. As Jonathan Saha (2021) goes on to note,

> The physicality and skins of both elephant and rider are also commented upon and made the focus of the image. Depictions of nudity and partial undress, as Philippa Levine has pointed out, could connote base savagery or be used in high aesthetics, but in this depiction of an oozie, the focus on the undressed body is to highlight his shared emotional and tactile connections to the elephant. The photograph is intended to show an intimate and innate connection between the two, a naturalistic portrayal that masked the more fraught relations of the forestry labor regime. (p. 915)

George Henry Evans in 1894 spoke of the importance of an oozie's tactile connection with their elephant. As Superintendent of the Civil Veterinary Department in the colony in the early twentieth century, Evans became a world-renowned expert in elephant maladies. Saha notes that Evans' major publication on the subject, *Elephants and Their Diseases*, in many ways epitomizes the detached, scientific mode of reducing animals into objects of study associated with imperialism.

Animals performing in indigenous native circuses in colonial India arrived via routes of animal trade run by Carl Hagenbeck's famed firm in Hamburg. Lorenz Hagenbeck (1956), son of Carl Hagenbeck, mentions in his memoir,

> There were soon literally hundreds of elephants up for sale. They were mainly tame animals, merely tethered by one fore and one hind leg between a couple of trees, but there were those which were still not broken in, and these were firmly lashed to really powerful trees with cables as thick as a man's arm. Day after day fresh herds of ten to fifteen elephants each came in. They all swam to the fairground across the Ganges, together with their mahouts. (p. 139)

In colonial Calcutta, there was great curiosity surrounding a white elephant named Pa Wa. The Centenary Volume of Calcutta Zoo (1875-1975) records that "The zoo was lucky to have a rush of visitors who considered a white elephant

to be the 'Living Deity'..." (cited in Science Reporter, 2015, p. 35). Animals within native settings quite often drew their relevance from religious mythology. In this regard, many Indians viewed the white elephant through the mythical lens of Aravat, who was the carrier of the Vedic-Aryan deity Indra. For circus companies that wanted to appeal to the expectations of both the locals and colonizers, such exotic displays of elephants became the model. In this regard, Reiko Ohnuma's study on "Animal Doubles of the Buddha" presents interesting examples of elephant imagery in Buddhist literature. There, too, the presence of a white elephant, as auspicious as and characteristic of Buddha himself, is pitted against the wild male elephant, with musth. embodying aggression and brutish instincts, as a figure of worldly existence. The encounter of Buddha with the wild male elephant, whom he transforms through gentle touch and a benevolent voice, is a particularly fascinating narrative (Ohnuma, 2023, p.74). The figuration of the elephant in the circus, by contrast, abounds with references to handlers who train elephants through violent methods, using bullhooks and chains (Gruen, 2014, p. 42).

Circus managers creating popular acts also suggested "harmonious co-existence" be emphasized in their imagery, in which animals who would be staunch enemies in their natural habitat would be staged in a scene that did not feature aggression from the animals. These scenes, popularized by Hagenbeck, also represented the final victory of culture over nature. However, circus within the indigenous sphere served corporeal nationalism by presenting the human and non-human animal acts as a means of promoting the idea of a physical culture, through an appropriation by the indigenous Hindu elites of practices of the subordinate class and castes, creating a hegemonic cultural symbolism of nonhuman animals present in the Indic traditions. For the circus, performing feats with animals served as a means of mastering and controlling the wild through instruction and training. Alternatively, within alternate histories and registers of pastoral care, it also affirmed the agency of animals as actors within an embodied moral ethos (Pandian 2000). If a native performer successfully tamed wild and ferocious animals like tigers and lions to perform tasks, or as with the famous elephant act in *The Great Bengal Circus*[10], where elephants were made to balance on stools, it would possibly hint at a successful demonstration of skill and mastery of human training. It was symbolically akin to the colonizer's own administration of the supposedly uncivil sections of indigenous society. Within the aesthetic sphere of local communities, however, the presence of the giant beast in a curated space had ambivalent implications. Such stagings reinforced the elephant's steadfastness, intelligence, and companionship with humans, but at the same time the elephant was devalued within Indic ethology as the prime animal mover in the political economy of kingship, a creature of the forest that the king needs to care for and attend to for the upkeep of his kingdom and attendant duties (Trautmann, 2015).[11]

Horses within colonial-anticolonial optics

The circus engendered a spatial distribution of the sensible through a harnessing of the immediacy of a spectacle of bodily acts along with a narrative staging of public events. This finds expression in Philip Astley's equestrian shows on a grand scale in his amphitheater. The rehearsed show of the rituals

10 The Great Bengal Circus was begun by Professor Priyanath Basu, in the late 19th century, and became an important point of contact between middle class Bengali physical culturists and European circus proprietors. With the gradual rise and fame of the circus company, the popularity of circus acts spread across the native states as well as internationally. The elephant act involving strongman Bhim Bhavani who would lie down with the elephant moving across a platform on his chest, as well as an elephant act involving elephants riding bicycles, became chief draws in the Bengal circus. While the circus moved places the refashioning of Bengali masculinity that was under scathing critique within colonial discourse, was sought to be resurrected.

11 Elephants formed an important part of ancient kingship in India. The Indian epics *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana* speak of elephants as war elephants; the male elephant in musth was an ideal figure for the king. However it also required that the elephant be looked after in ways sensitive to its forest habitat. The king had to ensure the elephant's maintenance by investing considerable resources in its natural diet and environment, as these elephants had a memory of their wild dwelling. See Trautmann, 2015.

of controlling the horse consisted of graceful and acrobatic displays on the horse's back, also known as trick riding. In the systematized practices of European equestrian shows, sartorial framing of these acts regulated the ideological through the disciplining of the body along the human-animal interface. Equestrian shows became the primary mode through which the regulation of the circus arena was sought. The various pantomimic horse acts oriented the grammar of corporeality in public performances. Through these acts Astley's shows created the imperial architecture of circus acts along transnational routes in the nineteenth century. A poster from an Astley equestrian show demonstrates how the event was inscribed with imperial symbolism, as the pantomimic horse acts presented a narrative of conquering the province of Delhi within colonial India. Set as a pantomime, in what seems the earliest exposition of the modern circus, Astley's Amphitheatre became the site of the circus's association with the empire (Coxe, 1980). This visual and narrative circulation of circus within the public sphere was significantly tied to the emerging institutions of physical culture in ethnonationalist settings. Further, it set forth the nominal ascriptions that circus as an event and form carried in the dominant cultural discourse.

I find that the empire's discourse of supremacy is enacted through the cultural symbolism of control (animals) and precarity (by inducing fear and wonder). Astley's circus combined the forces of melodrama with the bareness and immediacy of corporeality. It also sought to orient its cultural and commercial value through printed ephemera and posters that were widely circulated during the latter half of the 18th century. By sourcing materials and acts from around the globe, circus in Europe absorbed and reconfigured prominent historical events and settings into tales of oriental fantasies.

The Franconi circus in France presented the wild animal tamer Henri Martin along with animals in a three-act play with seven tableaux called *The Lions of Mysore*. Martin is presented as a fearless tamer of the wild, as the setting and ethos of the performance. Within oriental imaginaries, Martin becomes the ideal prototype of imperial training and civilizing the wild lions – serving as metaphors for the oriental public in the colonial imagination. By conflating the cultural negotiation of the wilderness with the political and military mastery over the province of Mysore, following uprisings by the indigenous cavalry under the British Raj in India in 1857, circus aesthetics became intertwined with the political discourse of empire as a form of mastery, control, and bio-power.

The embodiment of human and nonhuman animal relations in circuses in close association with other forms of physical culture calls for a recontextualization of such a relation within animal modernity. Yet one needs to look beyond the binaries affected by what Prathama Bannerjee characterizes as the "politics of time" in modernity, referring to the precolonial unified time of primitivity in contrast to industrial clock time that is hierarchically linear. I can elucidate this complexity by looking at circus acts in The Great Bengal Circus, as emerged within the anticolonial Bengali public sphere. Bareback riding and trick riding of horses were looked upon as signs of male virility. Yet two prominent equestriennes were women artists named Kumudini and Golap. Kumudini emerged as one of the most well-admired horse riders and earned the title of "empress of the arena" (Basu, 2013, p.120). I locate the optics of female horse riders in colonial Bengal in the familiar mythical image of a horse bewitching and alluring the king to the wilderness, building a fantasy meeting between the king and a lower-caste woman in the forest.[12] Women's horse riding in colonial Bengal thus became a means through which a discourse of masculinity and corporeal resistance to the dominant idea of the Bengalese as effete and of effeminate race was enacted ambiguously. As Indira Chowdhury (1998) detai-

12 The agency of the horse as a conveyor of the king, leading him to a forest where he encounters and gets drawn to a woman of lower caste, has interesting repercussions on how nonhuman animals function in some Indic traditions through the intersection of caste and gender norms. The horse here embodies the Vedic-Aryan sociality of sexual deviance and a subsequent caste appropriation of sexuality within the folds of normative categories. See Doniger, 2021.

ls in her work, the creation of the ideal subject of the Bengali upper-class anticolonial nationalism was the figure of the heroic female in the form of a Goddess who substituted for the unworthy Bengali effete man wont to moral weakness. Such a discourse dominated the curation of equestrian acts by women performers in the circus, who were deemed heroic and brave, challenging the dominant view of Bengalees as a cowardly race and simultaneously desirable within dominantly male spectatorship.

In Vedic myths, stallions are never tamed and roam freely across grasslands. It was only in its death that a stallion passed on the spirit of freedom to its king as a form of symbolic exchange (Doniger, 2021, p.15).[13] In contrast, an act in the Great Bengal Circus involved a donkey pulling a cart and a monkey in the role of pilot. The carriage breaks down, and the pilot changes the wheels while the genteel babu monkey would be attended to. In the Brahminical Indian discourse on animals which includes a caste-ist hierarchy of horses, the donkey is looked upon as a mixed breed. The design of this act in the Great Bengal Circus invokes the complex idea of horse breeding that appropriated the colonial optics of a hierarchical management of indigenous people and animals (Doniger 2021). In the Sanskrit *Pancatantras* (animal fables), the donkey is looked upon as an inferior caste within the hierarchy of a moral universe. The curation of this act through monkeys in anthropocentric roles mimicking the indigenous elite tradition, while the donkey is relegated to being controlled and tamed for manual labor, acts out the intersection of the existing caste structure with the political economy of race. It demonstrates how the colonial systems of administration and biopolitics redefined and incorporated existing social hierarchies into structures.

Taming big cats and their ideological constructions

Ideological constructions of effeminacy within the discursive formations of the colony were imbricated with the racial economy of civility. Following the uprisings of 1857 and a re-organization of military labor through the categories of the martial and non-martial, Bengalis were associated with weakness and disability, and with being non-martial and lacking the acceptable parameters of colonial masculinity. A resistive and oppositional self-fashioning from the propertied Hindu Bengali middle class involved a revivalist physical and moral selfhood characterized by a regulation of excess and harnessing of virility through a kind of masculine asceticism. In contrast, the iconography and typologies of the feminine were marked by a duality of the chaste and nurturing women within a household ethos on the one hand, and the heroic figure of a mother goddess with her lion conveyor as an incarnation of revolutionary strength, on the other (Chowdhury, 1998). The carnal significance of tigers as creatures of the wild seemed an apt background against which the gendered corporeal reconstitution of nationalist politics and its ideal subject was sought. The women animal tamers within this register operated along a duality of heroic, idealized icons similar to the mythical goddess Durga, while also being objects of a male gaze that sexually marked their public acts.

In this context, Miss Susila's[14] presence in The Great Bengal

13 In the Vedic myths around horse sacrifice, stories abound of the stallion that belongs to a king roaming freely across lands attended by the king's men; the lands the horse traverses through its grazing become those of the king through the death of the horse. In a way, the horse upon dying symbolically transfers its freedom in a territorial context upon its king. See Doniger, 2021, p.15. In the Buddhist tradition, the horse Kanthaka is the conveyor of the Boddhisattva, and is associated with renunciation and attainment of Buddha. The horse here has an agency to be a part of its master's spiritual journey, reflecting in its own renunciation of the Boddhisattva in empathy with him. See Ohnuma, 2023.

14 Miss Susila was a star woman trapeze artist and animal tamer in the Great Bengal Circus. Her most popular act involved leaning on the tiger and petting him in an embrace. Seen through the ambivalent middle-class male gaze, Susila is both sexually desirable through her fleshly presence, yet as a circus performer can only exist within the discourse of male tutelage and training. Any possible spillage of her sexualized body into the optics of national physical culture was deemed unbecoming of respectable womanhood. There are many anecdotes about Susila's popularity in the Bengali circus space and about being on the receiving end of sexual advances as a public woman.

Circus demonstrates the subalternized erasure of the figure of the public woman. While references to newspapers are sufficient in praise of Susila's skillful acts, there is a certain vocabulary through which she is deemed worthy because she comes out of the fold of the traditional understanding of Bengali women as timid and domestic (Basu, 2013). As a young teenager, Miss Susila had already gained popularity with her trapeze and pyramid acts, and later she was also introduced to tiger acts, where she would enter the cage and playfully lie on the tiger as it reclined. This presents a contrast to the taming of wild cats read through certain semiotics of masculinity. An important example of indigenous and native methods of animal taming can be seen through Damoo Dhotre's training of animals in the 1930s-50s. Epitomized as a national symbol, Dhotre was known to train wild animals, like lions and tigers, through care and instructional training.

In his autobiographical writing *Wild Animal Man*, narrated to Richard Taplinger, Dhotre sees himself as becoming a well-recognized animal trainer from being a skinny young boy who wanted to travel the world. He became a celebrity by traveling with American circus companies (Dhotre 17). It is here that the visuality interests me. While there are ample photographs of and biographical data about Damoo's life as an animal tamer in the circus, Miss Susila's presence is rather scant and obscure in the visual sphere. Of the existing sources, the one that verifies this act is the photograph that has survived to this day, of Susila leaning on a tiger in a cage, published in books compiled by the family members of Priyanath Bose, the owner of the Great Bengal Circus.

I acknowledge that this photograph does not have archival verification and is not present in any other public documentation nor circulation. However, it is marked by a choreography that inscribes Susila within the male fantasy of a woman taming the wild animal, making her desirable. The subsequent lack of circulation of the photograph in print could attest to the discomfort within the male genteel class around Susila's visuality. I see in this a viable case of an archival phenomenon described by Rebecca Schneider: "in the archive, bones are given not only to speak the disappearance of flesh, but to script that flesh as disappearing by disavowing recurrence or by marking the body always already 'scandal'" (Schneider, 2012, p. 73).

The terms in which Susila's presence was instrumentalized in the circus arena, and subsequently her identity beyond the tent was marked by erasure, is epitomized in the spectrality of her wounded flesh after being attacked by the tiger during her act (Basu, 2013). It was a grotesque moment of a life lived, where she as a public woman was denied entry within the domain of respectability of hetero-patriarchal women.

The performative economy of 'wild' and 'tame' in human-nonhuman interface

I do not intend to suggest an organic and holistic relationship and embodiment of human-nonhuman interactions within pre-colonial Indic society and its forms of entertainment. Rather, I suggest that if we read the space of native indigenous societies and cultures as one in which a certain sense of cohabitation without a complete subsuming and appropriation within the surplus values of mercantile capitalism exists, then it may offer alternate frameworks of situating such an embodiment. The *Mānasollāsa* and *Mātaṅgalīlā*[15] are examples of textual traditions that elaborate on numerous social and cultural interactions between humans and non-human animals through both verbal and gestural communication within a framework of the moral forces of karma and the cycle of life. When human-nonhuman animals are read through the

15 These Sanskrit and Prakrit textual traditions involve elaborate manuals of training and caring for elephants. Ranging from training elephants to dietary instructions to sporting manuals for the fitness of mahouts and elephants, these traditions reflect the mixing of daily everyday practices, and their local regional articulations with a more structured manual using Sanskrit terms prevalent in courtly discourse, thus explicating an interconnected social-strata around human- nonhuman animal relationships.

Figure 1. *A photograph of Miss Susila with the tigress Lakshmi, at the Great Bengal Circus. Note*. Wikimedia Commons. The image is in the public domain and beyond the Copyright Act. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Sushila_Sundari.jpg

worldviews presented in Indic texts, one finds a vast register of what one may call an entangled embodiment of human and the nonhuman beings. To a certain extent, acts of animal taming and exotic acts, while lending themselves to the visual registers of a colonial gaze, also created, on certain occasions, the possibility to read and experience indigenous native human-nonhuman animal interactions as bodies with countersignatures. This then requires not only an aesthetic and theatrical reading of acts of entertainment in public spaces but a consideration of the multilayered presence of human-nonhuman animal bodies as a site of witnessing. Within such a multifaceted experience, the wild and the tame share both colonial and native Indic registers. While colonial semantics point to how animals were instrumental to an industrial economy, the native registers of animal ecology looked at animal categories through their locomotion. Within Hindu Indic traditions, certain locomotive animals are bearers or "vahanas," a means of conveyance of the highest order of human and divine worlds that permeate each other (Trautmann, 2015, p.123). In this context, the wild male elephant is the foremost conveyance of the king symbolizing the harnessing of sexual virility within the code of governance, whereas the lion also explicitly symbolizes order but within nature and forests and therefore is relegated as the conveyor of divine deities like the mother goddess Durga and her various forms.

It is precisely also the reason why, by enacting stereotypically curated acts with forms of local knowledge and traditions,

new mobilities and embodied passages opened up for native performers to move beyond the hegemonic ways their bodies were inscribed as sites of knowledge production. Through circus acts of taming exotic animals characterized as wild, as by Badalchand and Miss Susila in the Great Bengal Circus, and Damoo Dhotre in Karlekar's circus, one enacted within, as well as beyond, the confines of a racialized grammar of corporeality, becoming the master as well as rewilding hierarchies, even if momentarily through a sensorial and fleshly solidarity with spectators. In all these acts the choreography of the big cats tamed by the native human artists, enact the permeable ethos of human-non-human subaltern bodies to serve the anticolonial nationalist idiom of brave and skilled native performers as the ideal corporeal subjects of nation-building. Within these circus acts both the human and non-human other of the colonial subject collude to create narrative enactments of their positions and subsequent desire for autonomy.

Such a permeable embodiment is also evident in popular textual traditions in native spaces. A cautionary tale in the mode of an animal fable in nineteenth century Bengal published in the monthly periodical *Shishu* [Children] titled "Botuk", is an example of how narrative traditions of animal folklore as demonstrated by the Pali Jatakas, and Sanskrit Pancatantras, are adapted from the othered nonhuman animal's position to speak to the colonial regime. The story addresses how a mother goat saves her kids who had been devoured by a tiger by cutting open the tiger's stomach and filling it with stones. It teaches children the moral instruction that those who harm others bring onto themselves the same. Within the context of the Swadeshi movement, a nationalist project of resisting the British monopoly of the colonial market, the mother goat's refusal to submit to the powerful figure of the tiger served as a significant illustration of the idea of resisting the imperial market through indigenous production. The presentation of animals through potent narrative possibilities thus signposts the radical potential of their presence in discourse and also suggests how they may be spoken through and address the humans within changing ecological concerns prompted by imperial activities.

Conclusion

Exploring the philosophical position of being seen by the seen animal within the framework of colonial Indian circus requires careful negotiation of aesthetic and political nodes of the animal sign within official colonial records, visual archives, and local anticolonial modes of resistive narratives and performance. Human-nonhuman animal performances in colonial space also bring to the fore a reconsideration of the conceptual terrain of captive labor of nonhuman animals. The circus in the colonial public sphere becomes a site of ambivalence, a space that hides and reveals the colonial binding of labor with capital. The architecture of the traveling circus masked the colonial markings of the performative labor of nonhuman animals through a performance of empathy and training.
Finally, to write an embodied history of human-nonhuman performance in colonial Indian circus, I suggest that the archival logic of performance history needs a politics of recovery through a critical consideration of the continuity of structures of thought around human-nonhuman animal relations from ancient Indic knowledge systems to the postcolonial present. Through the specific engagement of this article, I found that the circus in colonial India, as a traveling form between the metropole and the colony, became a site that brings into conversation the various Indic and colonial registers of human-animal relationship. While embracing and incorporating the grammar of colonial optics, the native circuses mobilized existing forms of entertainment involving non-human animals for local viewership. Indigenous circus companies, however, despite working through colonial methods of training animals in captivity, did critique the coexistence of care with capture that was sustained through a systemic deployment of biopolitical control of human and non-human resources within the colonial order. This is not to suggest that in societies prior to colonization, there is no history of animal capture. Ancient

Buddhist, as well as Hindu knowledge traditions, speak of detailed ethological and taxonomical documentation and manuals of animal care and preservation. The *Mrigapakshi Shastra, Mātaṅgalīlā*, and other textual traditions are relevant examples of the same. To the possibility of a critique of this method of reading through textual and oral traditions within Indic knowledge systems, and conceptualizing circus as a phenomenological site where bodies present themselves in movement and enact material relations, I offer a conceptual rethinking of these two seemingly disparate modes of sources, especially with regards to human-nonhuman animal relations. I suggest that the oral and textual traditions of Indic animal folklore may be read and understood as ciphers of embodied multispecies experience that informed the Indian understanding of territoriality through historical periods. On the other hand, human-nonhuman animal acts in circuses are not just confined to the circus's aesthetic grammar. They mark a space with movement and an affective discourse.

While a complete encapsulation of how the animal sees may be impossible, a critical appropriation of the ways of being seen/unseen from the animal's viewpoint may help recalibrate the anthropocentric discourse of characterizing circus acts within the colonial Indian sphere.

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Cierre de la cuarta versión de la conferencia internacional Circo y sus Otros (CaiO IV). Centro Nacional de las Artes, Bogotá, 2 de marzo, 2024. Foto: Nicolás Mahecha