

# Book Review of Sadiah Qureshi's 'Peoples on Parade'

Sadiah Qureshi, *Peoples on Parade: Exhibitions, Empire, and Anthropology in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2011)

**Author: Prof. Crispin Bates**

*Peoples on Parade* creates the most full and nuanced picture of the practice of displaying 'peoples' in nineteenth century Britain to date. Accompanied by rich illustrations, it weaves the relationship between human exhibitions and the development of anthropology into a wider context concerning contemporary debates surrounding colonialism, injecting a dynamism into our perception of nineteenth-century racism and its legacies in the practice of museums and of anthropology in the present day.

In order to embrace the broad thematic span of the book, Qureshi's study is divided into three parts: 'Street Spectacles', 'Metropolitan Encounters', and 'The Natural History of Race'. Over the course of two chapters, the first part provides a context for the initial market for displayed peoples and discusses the use of promotional materials as evidence.

Qureshi creates a vibrant portrait of an ethnically diverse nineteenth century London, introducing the existence of the 'urban spectator', inhabitants and visitors who were trained to see and interpret human difference by virtue of their exposure to urban street life. She uses a variety of contemporary observers' writings to do so, arguing that everyday experiences of human variety fed into the same desire to categorise and define that produced commercial displays of foreign peoples. By highlighting the already visible ethnic diversity in the population of London, Qureshi hopes to indicate 'more nuanced understandings of why displayed peoples were ever commercially successful' rather than just their skin colour.

Part two of the monograph, 'Metropolitan Encounters' moves into the cultural and social landscape described in part one to explore the exhibitions themselves. Qureshi turns her gaze upon the producers, the performers, and the audiences involved. A cast of organisers are introduced, highlighting the variety of motivations behind the creation of human displays. George Catlin, a painter of indigenous North American society who turned to exhibiting indigenous material culture and peoples as a more lucrative business, presents one of the more sympathetic characters. As does George Henry, or Maungwudaus, an Anishinabe who became a missionary before taking a group of Anishinabe to London in 1844. A range of familiar paternalistic missionary and social concerns emerge as factors in the display of peoples, as do the more sinister colonial impetuses to poke and prod the 'exotic'. There are clearly considerable grey areas between voyeurism, scientific study and empathetic curiosity in the history of displayed peoples and early anthropology. Qureshi is keen to emphasise the presence of

ethnographic interests from the very beginning of the industry, describing the interchange between lectures and displays of peoples. However, she does not neglect to confront the elements of showmanship, pointing out that 'showmen' or managers frequently curated their performers' appearances to match audience expectations.

The second chapter of part two is vital. It attempts to flesh out the experiences of those on display and avoid casting them as passive victims. To this end, Qureshi employs vignettes from newspapers and periodicals. She is self-admittedly hampered by the lack of interest shown in recording displayed peoples' perspectives in the nineteenth century. Nevertheless, broader social and political contexts are given to the lives of individuals such as Maximo and Bartola, Spanish children with learning difficulties caused by probable encephalitis marketed as 'the last Aztecs', and Sara Baartman, a South African woman 'imported' for display who appears to have faced great adversity. The details of their 'professional' lives are hard to stomach as they are exhibited and 'loaned' for scientific analysis and at points it feels as though there is potentially much more for Qureshi to mine from their cases. She does, however, enter into fruitful discussions regarding the nature of consent, contracts, examples of agency, and intermarriage between performers and audience members. Other instances of sympathetic intercultural encounter are elaborated upon in the following chapter. Qureshi seeks to chart the diversity of patrons' responses to both performances and performers, demonstrating the ways in which shows were seen as relevant to personal curiosity, 'discussions of human development, foreign policy, military activity and social satire' and not just unthinking gawping.

If the first two parts of this monograph consistently reiterate the role of displayed peoples in the developing discipline of ethnology (later anthropology), it is in the final part, 'The Natural History of Race', that Qureshi firmly lashes them together. This section traces change over time, elaborating on the extent to which the observation, classification and discussion of displayed peoples has been overlooked as a component in the early development of anthropology. Chapter 6 is largely a discussion of the evolution of ethnology through the lens of prominent figures in the field and their interaction with and opinions on the displays and depictions of peoples. In Chapter 7, the upscaling of the show industry at the end of the nineteenth century and the ensuing shifts in its relationship with the increasingly institutionalised discipline of anthropology are outlined. Two contrasting human displays feature prominently; at one end is 'Savage South Africa', an entertainment spectacle on a grand scale in the 1890s which featured over two hundred African performers and a huge mock homestead in Earl's Court, and at the other is the Indian and Colonial Exhibition (1886), a grand international fair organised with academic consultants. The gap between the former and scientific inquiry was wide. However, the latter's engagement with the Anthropological Institute provided opportunities for members to act as curators, conduct research, and more subtly, Qureshi argues, the collection fostered the training and building of an anthropological research community.

By the close of the nineteenth century, the scale of entertainment, the discipline of anthropology and the nature of empire had changed. Travel to foreign lands was more

accessible than ever and British anthropological interest now embraced 'notions of culture, social organisation, religion, myth, ritual and kinship' (as seen in works such as Frazer's famous *The Golden Bough* in 1890), requiring new methodologies such as ethnographic field research *in situ*. As a consequence of these transformations, Qureshi contends, the affiliation between anthropology and the exhibition of humans faded.

Qureshi's final chapter, 'Afterlives', stands alone. It is a conclusion but also contains crucial reflections for the modern reader to consider. These are so valuable, that one wonders if they should have been left to the last. The first is a fleeting comparison between a 2002 show 'Africa! Africa!' staged by an African company and the 'Savage South Africa' exhibition, which raises many questions concerning agency, authorship and acceptable spectacles. The second concerns a 1992 art installation, 'Two Undiscovered Amerindians', which toured the US, Australia and London and featured a man and woman within a golden cage purported to be examples of an undiscovered people. Their ready audience demonstrated a less than empathetic response, removing the distance we would like to impose between us and the audiences of the nineteenth century. Qureshi's reflection upon the installation provides us with a vital perspective on past behaviours and forces us to be mindful of the experience of the displayed. I would argue that despite its chronological location, perhaps it would have served a greater purpose if placed in the introduction of the book.

Qureshi recognises that there is a pressure on historians to distance themselves from nineteenth century attitudes and therefore denounce the displays of humans as 'pseudoscientific' entertainment. She contends that instead we need to engage with them critically and acknowledge their relationship with the development of anthropology, or risk dismissing their significance and complexities. She has admirably addressed this, deftly sewing the evolution of ethnology-anthropology and the display of peoples back together and showing their reliance upon each other. Yet, her just desire for interrogation over moral outrage has led, one imagines, to the detachment that predominates in places. Without a doubt, Qureshi sees the displayed peoples involved and understands their exploitation; in her conclusion she contends that we still perpetuate the consumption of ethnic typologies today through documentaries and in tourism settings. The same can also be said of anthropological museums, which are in the present day grappling with the dilemma of how to present their subjects in ways that do not objectify them. Nonetheless, the injustice of audience members paying to touch Sara Baartman or her experience of scientists attempting to measure her labia is inescapable and can only be truly assuaged by a portrayal of the displayed as full characters in history. The perpetuated silence of those on display is clearly not intentional here; Qureshi includes what explicit evidence does exist as evidenced in the thought-provoking discussions in Chapter 4. Yet, perhaps there could have been a deeper attempt to explore these encounters and read these sources 'against the grain'. The account from Trilokya Nath Mukharji, an Indian curator working on the Indian and Colonial Exhibition regarding his ambiguous experiences at the fair (Chapter 7) briefly bridges the gap between us and the experiences of the displayed, making us harshly aware of their absence elsewhere. Yet, as the title of Qureshi's book makes clear, an indigenous perspective is not the focus of this study and it is maybe unfair to criticise her for side-lining of it. The book is already dense with important insights and it will

perhaps be the responsibility of another academic study, to take the step of placing the displayed people themselves centre stage in their own history, and to recover whatever tattered shreds of agency they may have exercised within their lives.