

The Body as Site, Movement and Migration: The South African Indian Diaspora in Dance and Archive

Anusia Govender-Elshove

University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg

Corresponding author email

anusia.govender-elshove@wits.ac.za

ORCID

Anusia Govender-Elshove <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3888-6970>

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narratives of the 'Other', across generations, and offers new modes for understanding citizenship and belonging.

Keywords

Indian indentured, Indian dance, family archive, migration, South Africa, decolonial methodology

One sentence summary

The movement and migration of the Indian dancing body to and within South Africa, and its socio-political experiences are explored through the family archive of pioneering Indian dance pedagogues.

Abstract

This visual essay questions what constitutes an archive. Using autoethnography as a method, it frames the relation between my family's sixty-five-year-old dance archive and embodiment as co-constitutive and relational dynamics. It foregrounds minor histories as a tactic for resisting hegemony, in the face of homogenisation and operations of control. This situates dance as a counter-archive: a site where memory, resistance, and cultural knowledge are preserved through embodied movement when material traces have been erased or lost. In South Africa, issues of citizenry, xenophobia, genocide and poor living conditions persist. Moving against this genealogy of oppression, the essay spans from indenture and migration, through apartheid to the present, and aligns personal archive, diasporic history, and contemporary practices to examine how dancing bodies rehearse and reconfigure the often misunderstood or under-represented. It presents minor socio-political

I am a descendant of indenture. My ancestry was forged by empire's need to replace slavery with a labour force to produce 'white gold': sugar.¹ Consequently, the Indian diaspora was dispersed across the globe in the fifteenth century to the Caribbean (1845) and to Africa, particularly Mauritius (1834) and South Africa (1860). As Anita Ratnam observes, 'The diaspora body is intersected with location and dislocation – of an uprooting and a transplanting in distant and strange soils'.² This visual essay draws on my family dance archive, carefully documented over a period of sixty-five years, initially by my late mother, Rani Govender (1944–2005), the first South African pedagogue of Bharata Natyam and Kathak, and later by me. In the late 1950s,

she and her sisters, Prema and Radha Nydoo along with Salochana Naidoo, were the first South African women of Indian descent to travel to Madras, now Chennai, India, to study a full repertoire of Bharata Natyam – a South Indian classical dance form. Limited resources and the lack of diplomatic ties between India and apartheid South Africa severed traditional, cultural and religious moorings.³ Like the Ghanaian Sankofa bird, I look back to look forward, using artefacts from the archive to re-story how the body performs under repression through dance and embodiment. For me, movement and migration are inseparable from dance.

SRI SARASWATHY GANA NILAYAM
 TRIPPLICANE : : : MADRAS-5
BHARATHA NATYA ARANGETRAL



Kumari RANI & Kumari PREMA (of South Africa)
 Daughters of Smt. & Sri M. A. Nydoo of (Durban) South Africa.
 (7th & 7th Disciples of Sri K. LALITHA - Director of the Nilayam)
 on 15th June 1961 at Rasika Ranjani Sabha, Mylapore at 6-30 p.m.
HON'BLE SMT. LOURDAMMAL SIMON
 Minister for Local Administration, Presides

Girmitiya in South Africa

Famine, colonial religious and social restrictions, disease, and extreme deprivation in India compelled twenty-two-year-old Parumaul to put his thumbprint to a *girmit* (indenture agreement), written in the foreign language of English, and believe a false promise of an abundant life. I located a copy of the original emigration certificate (ship's list) of my maternal ancestor, certified by the former Department of Indian Affairs. The realisation that 'the migrants can't use these certificates, ... they nevertheless function as erstwhile documents through which a certain (retrospective) humanity may be given to a people without "history"' is stark.⁴ According to my late *aya* (great-grandmother), the *girmitiya* (indentured

labourers) were transported across the *kala pani* ('black waters'), and upon arrival at the port of Durban on South Africa's east coast, they were lined up like cattle, publicly stripped and inspected for identifying markings, and personal belongings were burnt – a symbolic erasure of personhood.⁵ Gayatri Spivak asks: 'As the historical record is made up, who dropped out, when and why?'⁶ Although materially dispossessed and physically humiliated, the indentured carried their culture within them. Our family archive is therefore bereft of any early material belongings. Beyond ethnic dance and music, the possibility remains that some of the indentured had received training in classical dance.

B.N.25

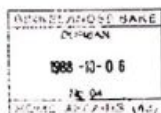
DEPARTMENT OF HOME AFFAIRS - DEPARTEMENT VAN BINNELANDSESAKE

COPY OF SHIP'S LIST OF INDIAN EMIGRANT

Serial Number	:	105
Colonial Number	:	56616
Date of Arrival	:	20:12:1894
Name of Ship	:	CONGELLA
Place of Registration	:	---
Date of Registration	:	---
Number in Register	:	---
Name	:	PARUMAIL
Father's Name	:	PARUMAIL
Age	:	22 YRS.
Sex	:	MALE
Caste	:	KOSAVA
District	:	MADURA
Thanna/Taluq	:	MADURA
Village	:	KADAMANGALAM
Height	:	5'6"
bodily Marks	:	SCAR ON LEFT SIDE OF BELLY
Name of Next-of-Kin	:	---
Relations Accompanied	:	FATHER
Small Pox/Vaccinated	:	VACCINATED
Remarks	:	---

Certified a true copy.

REGIONAL REPRESENTATIVE



B.N.25

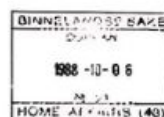
DEPARTMENT OF HOME AFFAIRS - DEPARTEMENT VAN BINNELANDSESAKE

COPY OF SHIP'S LIST OF INDIAN EMIGRANT

Serial Number	:	231
Colonial Number	:	36132
Date of Arrival	:	06:03:1888
Name of Ship	:	BARQUE ZUATH LAMBA
Place of Registration	:	---
Date of Registration	:	---
Number in Register	:	---
Name	:	M. RAMAYAH
Father's Name	:	M. APPAYAH
Age	:	18 YRS.
Sex	:	MALE
Caste	:	KAPUDANUM
District	:	GUNJAM
Thanna/Taluq	:	KARAKAVALSU
Village	:	RAVICHANDRAI
Height	:	5'2"
bodily Marks	:	FACE RITES WITH SMALL POX
Name of Next-of-Kin	:	M. DULAPPE - BROTHER
Relations Accompanied	:	---
Small Pox/Vaccinated	:	VACCINATED
Remarks	:	---

Certified a true copy.

REGIONAL REPRESENTATIVE



Dance

Ashwin Desai and Goolam Vahed, among other authors, argue that the indentured's struggle for survival, or practice of their culture, was not considered a colonial priority.⁷ Singing or dancing while working in the sugarcane fields was punishable by lashing and many new arrivals struggled with this adjustment. It took a century before the Indian diaspora in South Africa could publicly express themselves in a full repertoire of Indian classical dance. I am left to reimagine what the Nydoo Sisters' Bharata Natyam choreographed duets would have looked like, as much of the early visual record (film and pictures) were lost in a fire. Their choreography, through body positioning,

footwork, mudras (hand gestures) and rasa (facial expressions), where bodies become archives, narrated stories from ancient religious texts. These performances, an act of archiving itself, were subversive.⁸ The physical archive began as a scrapbook, compiled by my mother at the start of her dance career in 1959, to mark achievements. It is not merely a collection of artefacts, but an embodied historical record of how Indian (classical) dance migrated to, and evolved in, South Africa. As Neeraj Bhatia argues, 'There is no political power without control of the archive', foregrounding it as a critical site of cultural resistance and historical reclamation,



functioning as both a counter-history and a means of restoring agency.⁹

I became the custodian, curator, witness, and embodied archive, bridging past and future Indo-South African dance traditions. Due to South Africa's (historic) lack of diplomatic ties with India, traditional expressions differ from those of other Indian diasporas, and formal training required self-funded study abroad. This severely limited Indian South Africans' access to formal training in traditional dance. In addition to the two classical dance styles introduced by my family, I became South Africa's first exponent of Odissi (1986) and Sufi Kathak (1990), while my mother

and I researched and introduced ethnic Indian dance styles into the country. In 1993, we converted The Nydoo Sisters School of Dance into the non-profit Anavarata Dance Institute, offering low-cost or free dance education to South Africans, while hosting inclusive multicultural performances, nationally and internationally. In 1996, we were commissioned by the National Education Department to develop the country's first Indian dance syllabi, which despite the constitutional promise of an inclusive cultural expression, is yet to be implemented at basic education level and therefore limits current local tertiary study and research.

Fig. 7: A puppet mechanism depicting Indian dance as cultural isolation during apartheid, and a miniaturised representation of my family archive, in the installation *Where Do We Leave Our Footprints?*, OSUN exhibition in collaboration with UniAndes (Colombia), Baard University (Berlin), and Latitudes Art Fair and Contra Arts Festival in Johannesburg, 23–26 May 2024. Photo: Robert Elshove.



Apartheid

Apartheid was a system of legislated separation which disenfranchised all aspects of life, for people of colour, including restrictions on movement and the right to vote. The 1950 Group Areas Act was choreographed as concentric rings, according to racialised hierarchies, with whites constituting the centre, followed by Indians, Coloureds (a mixed-race category) and Black townships on the periphery. Since the 1906 Asiatic Law Amendment Ordinance, or 'Black Act' as it came to be called, was passed to control Indian and Chinese entry into the Transvaal Colony, movement into 'white' areas required a 'pass'. This prompted Gandhi's leadership in the 1908 mass burning of passes, and the 1913 Satyagraha Campaign, which became a cultural incubator, created by apartheid, galvanising cultural

resistance. Within the oppressive socio-political climate of apartheid, our dance became a form of satyagraha (passive resistance) and ahimsa (non-violence) to reclaim agency and identity. Despite legal prohibitions against interracial association, my family subverted apartheid laws by inviting the late South African actor Ken Gampu (1929–2003) as guest of honour at their 1965 performance in Durban. Ironically, as my maternal grandmother noted in a newspaper interview, most audience members were white; drawn to the 'exotic' costumes and movement.¹⁰ The Nydoo Sisters received fan mail in Afrikaans, considered the 'white' oppressor's language. Interracial dance classes were at first taught surreptitiously and then, after the advent of democracy in 1994, publicly.

Fig. 8: Ken Gampu, the Nydoo sisters' guest of honour at a Durban performance, with their students, prior to their return to India to study Kathak, a North Indian classical dance style, known for its storytelling through rhythmic footwork, hand gestures and lightning pirouettes. Photo: *The India Trend*, 1965.

INDIAN CULTURE

"DANCING BELLS" WAS FITTING FAREWELL

DANCING BELLS WAS A FITTING FAREWELL

It was an evening of sadness and joy. Sadness because two stalwarts of the Indian cultural renaissance were leaving for India — joy because they brought home a vivid message for our glazed eye "westernised" lost souls.

This was perhaps the first time that a full scale dance production was mounted by anyone — and what a stirring evening it became.

With sixteen pupils whose ages could not have ranged more than an average nine years, the Nydoo sisters Rani and Prema provided three hours of sheer dancing delight for our starved masses.

Dances of every conceivable type were executed with such apparent ease that one was surprised at the standards reached especially in the Bharatha Natyam class.

The piece de resistance was undoubtedly the Siva-Parvati dance done on Bharatha Natyam basis by the Nydoo sisters. In a setting that would have done Mount Kailas justice the sisters went afire with this really difficult number. In a perfect exhibition of co-ordination and facial expressions the sisters reached a point as near perfection as could be possible. At the end of the twelve minute recital it left a feeling of awe inspiring respect for these two girls who in their teens have reached such a standard of perfection.

The narrations and decor by J. R. Devar, were well knit and timely. J. R.'s narrations at times reached a brilliance that reminded one of that brilliant narrator A. S. Chakrapani of All India Radio fame.

Cultural Tonic by the Nydoo Sisters



The outstanding feature of this show was the impact the Nydoo sisters have made on the younger generation. The little girls who participated in this show are very good and full of promise. One can only hope that when the Nydoo sisters come back they will continue to propagate this wonderful art.

A touch of filmland's glamour was present when Ken Gampu of Dingaka fame was introduced to the audience by Mr T. P. Naidoo. Obviously touched by the warm hearted response of the Indian audience, Ken Gampu could only muster a very sincere "thank you".



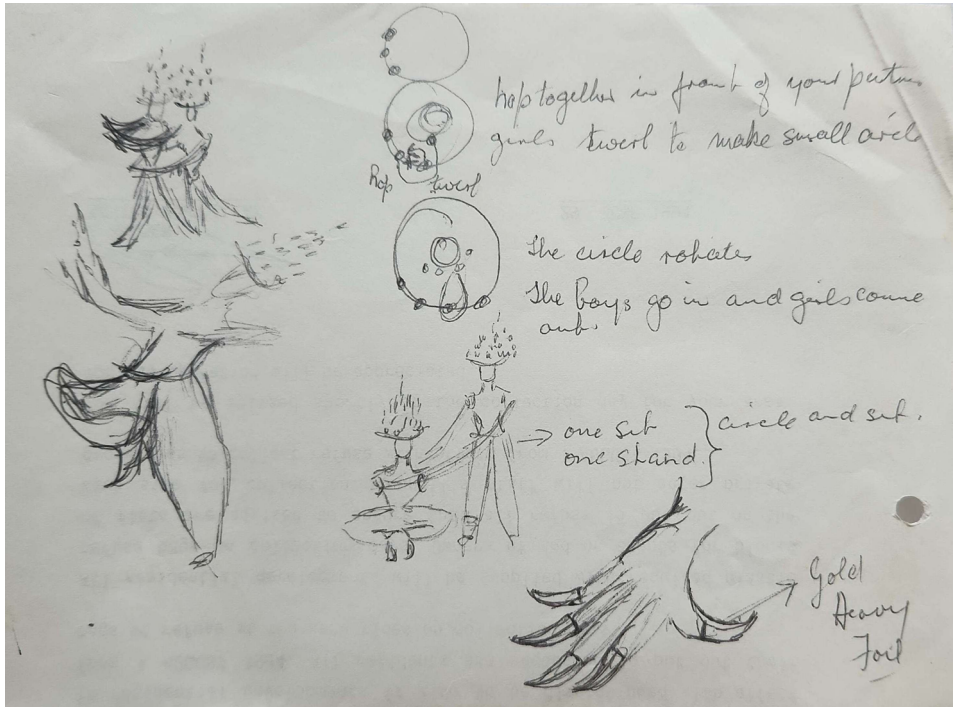
The present

Post-apartheid South Africa is characterised by movement, in and through spaces and places once denied to the 'Other'. Contemporary dance transcends race, as evidenced by the growing cultural exchange and acceptance beyond inherited identities. I now predominantly teach Indian dance, from classical to Bollywood and world dance styles, to Black South Africans. The repetition, focus, group cohesion and consistency of dance practice and performance temporarily suspend lived reality, offering dancers, many from disadvantaged communities, the opportunity to process hardships. It provides respite from contemporary challenges, while fostering resilience, collaboration and a sense of achievement. Dance empowers individuals and groups to resolve conflicts through collaboration. South Africa, shaped through trade, migration and hegemonic invasions, is a hybrid nation with a *mélange* culture,

an intermingling of cultures and bloodlines. The eclectic nature of my dance repertoire and of the archive reflect this multi-racial configuration, becoming a lens through which I interrogate my own cultural heritage and identity. Human experience always leaves a trace, however fragmented, shaping how we become. The future holds multiple possibilities for how the body, as individual, community, society and the danced, continues to evolve and respond to the challenges, traumas, adversities and triumphs. Africa, and South Africa in particular, have continued challenging hegemony. It is not just about biopolitics – the placement and structuring of bodies – but extends to the entire ecology, thus constituting a cosmo-technical operation. Dance continues to be a medium for resistance, an expression of tenacity, resilience, healing, celebration and way of life.

Fig. 9: Choreographic notes and costume design for a performance titled 'Illumination' that interwove Indian dance with African and other world dance styles for our Mauritian Independence Day Tour (1995), by Rani (Nydoo) Govender. Photo: author.

Fig. 10: A collaboration of professional South African dancers (from left to right), seated: Janell Barnard and Anusia Govender-Elshove; standing: Harry Khumalo and Oupa Mokwena (2002) in a Johannesburg performance combining Kathak (North Indian classical dance) and South Indian (Kalaripayattu) martial arts. Photo: Rani Govender.



Declaration of conflicting interests

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Notes

1. Balgobind Singh, Shanta, ed., *Indians in South Africa: Perspectives from 1860 to the 21st Century* (Durban: CSSALL Publishers, 2022).
2. Anita Ratnam, 'Foreword', in: Devar Singh Vasugi, *Bharatanatyam: An Ancient Indian Classical Dance: A journey from India to South Africa* (Durban: self published, 2019).
3. Ruchira Kamboj, 'India, SA ties can only get stronger', *Pretoria News*, 26 March 2018.
4. Goolam Vahed, Ashwin Desai and Thembisa Waetjen, *Many Lives: 150 years of being Indian in South Africa* (Pietermaritzburg: Shuter, 2010), 3.
5. Judith Misrahi Barak, 'Indentureship, Caste and the Crossing of the Kala Pani', *Studies in Humanities and Social Sciences* 14, no. 2 (2017): 18–36, 18.
6. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'The Rani of Sirmur: An essay in reading the archives', *History and Theory* 24, no. 3 (1985): 247–72, 270, [https://doi: 10.2307/2505169](https://doi.org/10.2307/2505169).
7. Ashwin Desai and Goolam Vahed, *Belonging: A History of Indian South Africans* (Johannesburg: Jonathan Ball Publishers, 2025); Ashwin Desai, 'The long struggle for Diwali: the first official Celebration was in 1910, 50 years after the arrival of Indian indenture', *POST*, 6–10 November 2018; Denis-Constant Martin, *Sounding the Cape: Music, Identity and Politics in South Africa* (Somerset West: African Minds, 2013); Enuga Sreenivasulu Reddy, 'India and South Africa: A Collection of Papers', *Occasional Papers Series No. 1* (Durban: The University of Durban-Westville, 1991); Anusia Govender-Elshove, 'Paper Choreography: My ancestors dance through me – Experimenting with the Unarchival of a South African South Asian Dancer's Family Archive while Exploring "Indian-ness" and Interwoven Dance Cultures and its pedagogical contribution to or implications for the reconfiguring of the Archive' (PhD diss., University of the Witwatersrand, 2023).
8. It is a code of sorts, indecipherable by outsiders. Franz Fanon in his various writings shows how colonialism enforces racial legibility, and Édouard Glissant talks about 'the right to opacity', i.e., how diverse cultures are respected and recognised differentially – 'to be fully seen is to be dominated'. Benjamin P. Davis, 'The Politics of Édouard Glissant's Right to Opacity', *The CLR James Journal* 25, no. 1 (Fall 2019), <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26946358>.

9. Neeraj Bhatia, 'Re-assembling the Archive', *AA Files* 77 (2020): 117–126, 117.
10. This issue is expanded upon by Edward W. Said's (1978) concept of orientalism; 'the Orient' is not a real place but a discursive construction. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'The Rani of Sirmur: An Essay in Reading the Archives', *History and Theory* 24, no. 3 (1985): 247–72, [https://doi: 10.2307/2505169](https://doi.org/10.2307/2505169). Franz Fanon's notion of the racialising gaze (from *Black Skin, White Masks*, 1952) and Walter Dignolo's argument that exoticism becomes a technology of knowledge extraction, are explored in Linda Martín Alcoff, 'Mignolo's Epistemology of Coloniality', *CR: The New Centennial Review* 7 (2007): 79–101.

Biography

Anusia Govender-Elshove is the progeny of her pioneering Indian classical dancer mother, the late Rani (Nydoo) Govender (1944–2005). In addition to Indian and African dance styles, Anusia's interests include dances of the world, interwoven dance cultures, dance theatre, paper engineering, and digital arts. She obtained her MA and PhD Degrees in theatre and performance at Wits University School of the Arts, around the curation of her sixty-five-year-old family dance archive and developing 'paper choreography' and 'unarchival' as decolonial methodology around liminal spaces in the documentation and re-storying of the Other. A former Centennial Postdoctoral Fellow at the University of the Witwatersrand, she is currently a lecturer in writing and interactivity at the Wits School of Arts Digital Arts Division.