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The Funambulists:
Balancing Propriety and Deviance in the Portrayal of American Circus Performers, 1870s-1940s

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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines how circus performers were portrayed during the golden age of the American circus, which encompassed roughly the last third of the nineteenth and first third of the twentieth centuries. It particularly focuses on those who belonged to marginalized groups in wider society—women, people of color, and those with disabilities and otherwise atypical bodies. I argue that these people were presented in a way that necessarily balanced propriety and deviance so as to allow audience members to indulge in "improper" fascinations while maintaining outward appearances of respectability. I do this by analyzing advertisements put out by circuses (mainly posters) and other non-circus affiliated publications (like newspaper articles), as well as additional information from a number of expert secondary works. The area of circus history is small and gradually emerging, but it merits scholarly attention. The circus was a major way that people experienced events and concepts beyond their local communities, and as such, it greatly influenced popular culture and helped shape how people viewed the world at large. It also provided a space for Americans to judge all of these new ideas as circuses stretched the standards of what was acceptable. The circus as an institution was simultaneously progressive and restrictive; it challenged and perpetuated social standards. The way in which the circus portrayed their diverse performers, therefore, reveals quite a bit about the corresponding changes in social attitudes during the time period, and about how much Americans were willing to accept—or reject—people who were vastly different from "normal."

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Introduction

Before the Golden Age

Live spectacles were a beloved form of entertainment in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and for Americans, the circus was an exceptional delight. Visions of striped tents and clowns and acrobats and elephants instantly come to mind when we hear the word "circus" today, a harmless place with smiling children and a misty air of enchantment. When the circus came to town, audiences looked on amidst clouds of pastel sugar, peanuts, and magic, while employees worked their hardest to put on a show through dirt, sweat, and resolve.

But circus showmen were masters of marketing, and the crowd's conception was as cotton candy-coated as their fingers. The dream of anyone being able to "run away and join the circus" is a trope that still endures, to some extent, in popular culture, but those who really did follow this path were frequently met with less of a fairytale escape and more of an arduous journey than they anticipated. The lives of circus workers often differed greatly from the glamorous lifestyle perceived by outsiders, especially those of women and minority groups.

During the period considered the heyday, or "golden age," of the American circus, roughly the 1870s through the 1940s (sometimes including or excluding a decade or so on either side),[1]

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[1] The period sometimes considered the "golden age" of the American circus is not an actual concrete period that is universally agreed upon. It has been variously referred to with this name as the years between 1871-1915 (Earl Chapin May, *The Circus from Rome to Ringling* [New York: Duffield & Green, 1932], as cited in Fred Dahlinger, Jr., "The American Circus Tent," in *The American Circus*, eds. Susan Weber, Kenneth Ames, and Matthew Wittmann [New Haven: Yale University Press, for the Bard Graduate Center, New York, 2012], 230n42); as 1870-1950 (Maria Popova, "Never-Before-Seen Photos From the Golden Age of Circus, 1870-1950," *The Atlantic*, Oct. 14, 2011, https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2011/10/never-before-seen-photos-from-the-golden-age-of-circus-1870-1950/246619/); as the general period including the Civil War through the Great Depression (Les Standiford, "The Circus Was Once America's Top Entertainment. Here's Why Its Golden Age Began to Fade," *Time*, June 15, 2021, https://time.com/6073381/circus-history/); etc. There is a general consensus, though, that the heyday of the circus is can safely be considered as the period I have described here, as numerous circus historians have tended to focus on this window when it comes to this topic (Katherine H. Adams and Michael L. Keene, *Women of the American Circus, 1880-1940* [Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2012]; Linda Granfield,

this itinerant means of entertainment was an incredibly fascinating entity that enticed Americans—and people around the globe, when it toured—both to spectate and to join. The circus was in many ways ahead of its time, providing an environment for people of all backgrounds and demographics to work alongside each other as the public settled into an escape from everyday reality. Through a combination of the quickly changing cultural conditions and social attitudes of the era as well as clever phrasing and visual portrayals through advertisements like posters, the circus underwent a change in image from a scandalous circle of depravity to three rings of the innocently educational and the cosmopolitan exotic. Scantily-dressed white women presented grace and morality; people of color, especially those from (or portrayed as being from) foreign countries, were made sexual and savage while being billed as a means to learn about faraway places; those with disabilities or otherwise atypical physical characteristics were, too, on display to provide not only entertainment but "education" for the general public. And even if people did not entirely buy this new branding and just wanted to visually consume the bodies of other people as objects of sheer morbid curiosity, the circus had become socially acceptable enough to attend for whatever reason, judgement-free.

What was noted in newspapers and printed on posters greatly influenced public perception of women and minorities in the circus, and this was naturally rooted in the opinion of "normal" American society—something that those on the inside were, in many ways, peripheral to or quite separate from. Circuses had to keep careful watch over the image of their performers, making sure to maintain a balance of propriety and deviance in order to keep spectators intrigued but not repulsed. On one hand, all performers were "loved" in a way, in the sense that the public loved the affair of going to the circus and seeing things—people—that they could not see anywhere else.

Dominique Jando, and Fred Dahlinger, *The Circus. 1870s–1950s*, ed. Noel Daniel [Cologne: Taschen, 2010]; etc.). When using this term, then, I am simply referring to this general time of the circus's peak of success rather than an actual concretely defined and scholarly established "age."

From a personal point of view, however, these performers were looked down upon as people, their value held in their being exhibits for the public's entertainment. Thus: the paradox of being loved as alluring and "exotic," yet being dehumanized and exploited for entertainment and money.

Examining the publicity surrounding golden-age circus performers, then, provides insight about the expectations of normalcy—of femininity, race, bodies different from most—held by the dominant part of American society during this critical period of cultural change. The circus, in its very nature, brought together the extremes of the world into one concentrated space and offered it to audiences across the country in a ribboned package. Consequently, the ways in which these performers were presented to the public reveals a great deal about how people constructed what was normal and acceptable over time, how they tried to bend people to fit into those parameters or excluded them, and what they thought about the people who would not—who could not—conform.

This thesis, especially the second half, heavily focuses on circus posters (and, in the last chapter, photographs) and newspaper articles from the golden age. An invaluable resource which I used to locate an overwhelming majority of these posters is the digital collections of the John and Mabel Ringling Museum of Art based in Sarasota, Florida (henceforth referred to in citations as the Ringling Museum). The digital collections of the Milner Library at Illinois State University were also greatly helpful for both posters and photographs, as were the special collections online of the Syracuse University Libraries for the latter. Other visual media sources include the Library of Congress website and the online collections database of the Circus World Museum in Baraboo, Wisconsin. The "America's Historical Newspapers" database from Readex and the "Nineteenth Century U.S. Newspapers" database from Gale Primary Sources were also substantially used.

A great deal of my background information for this thesis has been gathered from Janet M. Davis in her book *The Circus Age: Culture and Society Under the Big Top*; Katherine H. Adams and Michael L. Keene's book *Women of the American Circus, 1880-1940*; and various historians from a collection of scholarly essays published by Yale University Press simply entitled *The American Circus*. Ellen Butler Donovan's chapter in this collection on children's circus literature was particularly helpful to me in chapter one, and a number of my examples for that chapter come from her essay. Peta Tait's chapter, "Performed Identities as Circus Illusions," was likewise helpful for a portion of chapter two, especially regarding animal trainers. Jennifer Lemmer Posey's chapter on the circus spec proved a helpful base for chapter three, upon which I could build with additional research on posters. Along with Davis's book, *Freak Show* by Robert Bogdan provided thorough background information for chapter four, which proved useful particularly for comparing what I saw presented in primary visual media to actual details of the depicted performers' lives.

Finally, Paul Stirton's chapter ("American Circus Posters") in *The American Circus* not only aided me in chapter two, but also greatly inspired me to use circus posters for a significant amount of my analysis. "The circus poster," he wrote in 2012, "deserves the serious attention of historians." Many of the secondary sources I encountered and read have made reference to circus posters, but posters were still rarely, aside from Stirton's piece, a primary focus. I believe, and endeavor to make clear, that these works of visual ephemera were very important to how circuses constructed their public image, especially in a way that was more subtle and sly than publications that outright stated what they wanted the public to think, and should thus not be overlooked. Multiple types of media about the circus, though—internal or external—contribute insight about how the circus strove to portray its performers in accordance with how audiences viewed them, and are therefore included in my analysis.

The rest of this introduction gives a brief background and summarizes public opinion on the circus up until the golden age. In chapter one, I focus on the circus in relation to children, primarily regarding how adults (mostly negatively) portrayed the circus to children via newspapers, religious publications, and fiction. This is done to set the scene about what adults believed was "wrong" with the circus in the nineteenth century, and the subsequent chapters then show how circuses worked to reshape this public perception to their benefit. The remaining three chapters, then, examine the way in which circuses, reciprocal with external publications, portrayed circus performers. Chapter two focuses on women; namely, white women in the main show, where I continue to examine how the public felt about their chosen profession via newspapers and fiction before transitioning into how to circus portrayed them through posters and domestic narratives. Chapter three shifts attention to how performers of color were portrayed, which was usually in an "ethnological congress" setting with occasional appearances in the main show, as well as freak shows as ethnographic displays within the sideshow (particularly after the decline of the ethnological congress). In chapter four, I end with a look at visual media of freak show performers who were put on display for how different their bodies looked from the average viewer, and tactics that circuses employed to frame them within or outside of proper society.

A brief history of the circus's earlier past will provide some context before exploring it while in its golden age. At its very basics, the circus can be traced to the hippodromes of the ancient world; most notably, the Circus Maximus of ancient Rome. Certain features of the modern circus, such as horse acts, trained animals, and parade spectacles, were present in Roman circuses, and other acts seen in the modern circus like acrobats, jugglers, and clowns were a part of various

ancient societies. The modern circus that we know, though, was originated in England by Philip Astley when he began testing and refining a ring for his equestrian trick riding in 1768. He then hired a clown, musicians, and other performers to perform in his shows beginning in 1770. The term *circus* in relation to this new, specific type of show was coined in 1782 by Charles Hughes (a former employee of Astley), and the circus made its way to America in 1793 courtesy of John Bill Ricketts (a former student of Hughes).[2]

Circus tents did not appear from the beginning. Ricketts's crew began by building their own arenas from wood wherever they performed, though these were costly and at risk of catching fire. The canvases themselves first appeared in 1825, when, during a tour of his show, American showman Joshua Purdy Brown discovered that Wilmington, Delaware, where he was soon to perform, had banned public entertainment within its jurisdiction amidst the ongoing Second Great Awakening. To circumvent this ban, Brown set up his circus in a tent just outside of the city's jurisdiction so the show could go on. From then on, the temporary structure coupled with the costs of equipment and labor that went into these tents prompted circuses to quickly move from place to place to maximize profit, and they would commonly spend as little as one day in each place they performed. This, writes circus historian Janet M. Davis, "put a distinctly American stamp on the circus . . . cementing its identity as an itinerant form of entertainment."[3]

The rise of the railroad coincided with the beginning of the circus's golden age, and trains made for very efficient circus transport. P. T. Barnum himself joined the business in 1871 and, wasting no time, proprietors took his circus on the railroad in 1872. The Barnum circus employed

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[2] Antony Dacres Hippisley Coxe et al., "circus," in *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, last modified Aug. 5, 2019, https://www.britannica.com/art/circus-theatrical-entertainment.

[3] Janet M. Davis, "America's Big Circus Spectacular Has a Long and Cherished History," *Smithsonian Magazine* Mar. 22, 2017, https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/americas-big-circus-spectacular-has-long-and-cherished-history-180962621/.

a new system designed by Barnum's business partner William Cameron Coup that allowed fully-loaded wagons to be easily transported on and off the train flatcars. The circus industry continued to grow during the Gilded Age as spectators gathered across the nation to see the wildly successful shows.[4] Many circuses competed in the beginning, but the biggest ones ended up merging—like Barnum's and James A. Bailey's in 1881 and later Barnum & Bailey's with the Ringling Brothers' in 1907—and circuses flourished into the twentieth century.[5]

The circus offered Americans a world of its own to which local populaces flocked as it passed through their ordinary towns. For these people, "the sprawling circus collapsed the entire globe into a pungent, thrilling, educational sensorium of sound, smell and color, right outside their doorsteps," Davis explains. Though a bit of a simplification, some historians argue that the circus can be seen as a microcosm of society at the time, a sort of "projection of American culture and power"; the three-ring circus, Davis continues, "came of age at precisely the same historical moment as the U.S itself." These glittering enclaves of the uncanny and fantastical "were a product of the same Gilded Age historical forces that transformed" the United States "into a modern industrial society."[6] Americans could see a tiny slice of the great big world that, before widespread radio and television, was ordinarily beyond their reach. They could duck through a peppermint-patterned portal that transported them to a place where lions, tigers, and elephants lived, where acrobats, clowns, and trick riders performed, where bearded ladies, conjoined twins, and men from three to eight feet tall appeared before their eyes. When the circus came to town, people could purchase a ticket to a dazzling taste of things they could otherwise only read and dream about, obliviously viewing the oft-exploited lives of performers through red-and-white-striped glasses.

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[4] Ibid.

[5] Jeff Wallenfeldt, "Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus," *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, last modified May 19, 2021, https://www.britannica.com/topic/Ringling-Bros-and-Barnum-and-Bailey-Combined-Shows.

[6] Davis, "America's Big Circus Spectacular."

The twenty-first-century circus has been seen as a world of wonder meant primarily for children and families. Admittedly, there are now a number of circuses—many of them the ones that continue to thrive after the 2017 closing of the Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus's self-styled "Greatest Show on Earth"—marketed largely to adults (as well as families), like the Cirque du Soleil shows in Las Vegas. For the most part, though, when we think of the classic big top affair, we envision a day of innocent fun suitable for people of all ages but particularly those on the younger side. This world of happy children, however, was not at all how everything began.

In the industry's early days, people felt the need to shield their children from the immorality and degeneracy of the circus, believing it to be entirely unsuitable for young and impressionable minds. The venue began as a place for adults, mainly men, many parents believing that children were "particularly vulnerable to circuses' corruptive influence."[7] The environment of the circus was a much rougher one than we imagine today, one where violence was not only present but was commonplace.[8] Men with propensities for troublemaking and aggression accounted for a sizeable number of attendees, and they were more than willing to riot over anything and fight with anyone (and everyone), the high-energy environment and transient nature of the circus lending itself to its large and tumultuous crowds partaking in acts of violence as intense and ephemeral as the circus itself.[9] Other crimes like pickpocketing and short-changing were well-known incidents at circuses as well, things that would have been especially unpleasant to experience after parents had already

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[7] Mark Irwin West, "A Spectrum of Spectators: Circus Audiences in Nineteenth-Century America," *Journal of Social History* 13.5 (Winter 1981): 265-267, JSTOR.
[8] Daniel Noonan, "The Circus You Never Knew," *Humanities* 32.5 (Sep./Oct. 2011), https://www.neh.gov/humanities/2011/septemberoctober/statement/the-circus-you-never-knew.
[9] A myriad of contemporary newspapers recount instances of crime (especially violent crime) at circuses that ranged from small brawls to multiple murders, often exacerbated if not caused by the circus's raucous atmosphere and itinerant nature. For just a few examples, see: "Attack on a Circus Company by Texan Roughs," *Daily Evening Bulletin* (San Francisco), Dec. 16, 1873, Nineteenth Century U.S. Newspapers (Gale Primary Sources); "Killed in Kansas: Bloody Fight Between Citizens and Circus Men at Burr Oak, Kan.—Sixteen Showmen Arrested," *Daily Cosmopolitan* (Brownsville, TX), Sep. 25, 1884, America's Historical Newspapers (Readex); "'Hey, Rube!' Was the Cry: Pitched Battle Between Several Ruffians and the Employes [sic] of a Circus Leaving Newark," *New York Herald*, Aug. 8, 1892, America's Historical Newspapers (Readex).

spent their hard-earned money on tickets for the entire family.[10] All of this would have undoubtedly contributed to parents' views that the circus was not a place very suitable for their children.

Unsavory surroundings with criminal crowds were far from the only deterrent, though—the shows themselves were scandalous on their own. As briefly mentioned earlier in reference to Joshua Purdy Brown's circus, the Second Great Awakening caused many prominent figures during the first half of the nineteenth century to "denounce nearly all forms of commercial amusements and diversions," the circus included. P. T. Barnum, for instance, recalled having witnessed a local preacher condemning his circus to the congregation while it was in town in 1836.[11] Besides clergymen, many politicians joined in on the condemnation as well, for the brazen "display of the seminude athletic body." Some places in the antebellum period, including the entire states of Vermont and Connecticut, made it illegal for any circuses to perform whatsoever.[12]

The fact that entertainment purely for amusement's sake was shunned was enough to deter plenty of people, but the actual content of the shows was shocking to many, too; going to gawk at the bodies of scantily-clad women, wild "savages," and grotesque-looking "freaks" was not a morally upstanding, family-friendly, after-church activity. Considering all of this negative public opinion, it is likely that, during the antebellum period, few children and women attended circuses, and few religious as well as respectable, work-focused, frugal men would have gone either. Those who did go during this time, then, were probably "comprised primarily of men who were indifferent to the social and religious taboos against circuses. Recent immigrants, urban workers, and frontiersmen were, in all likelihood, well represented in pre-Civil War circus audiences."[13]

[10] West, "Spectrum of Spectators," 268.
[11] Ibid., 265.
[12] Janet M. Davis, "The Circus Americanized," in *The American Circus*, eds. Susan Weber, Kenneth Ames, and Matthew Wittmann (New Haven: Yale University Press, for the Bard Graduate Center, New York, 2012), 29.
[13] West, 265-267.

It was only later, in the last third of the nineteenth century, that public opinion had truly began to change enough that circuses were no longer seen as so immoral, due partly to naturally shifting social attitudes and partly to rigorous and clever marketing campaigns by circuses to improve their image and draw more business. Posters displayed a "bootstraps narrative of the circus capitalist," conveying how the biggest of showmen built themselves up from small beginnings in order to prove their "industry, thrift, and sobriety . . . showing their audiences that their shows were respectable institutions, run by men of unimpeachable character."[14] The Ringlings' show even banned alcohol and gambling at one point and was dubbed a "'Sunday School' entertainment."[15] As will be explored, proprietors reframed their shows as virtuous and educational, and they aimed and eventually succeeded in their efforts to "nullify opposition from those who questioned [their] respectability."[16] In light of this, as the century went on, people became increasingly more open to indulging in entertainment, and such outings became more socially accepted.[17] Attendee demographics broadened to include adults from multiple classes, races, and genders. By the twentieth century, children would finally make up a large portion of the audience.[18] The process of transforming the circus into a place fit for children was not a brief and easy one, but by the golden age, it was mostly accepted that children could—and were encouraged to—attend. The way people viewed circus workers themselves was very complex, though, and just because the circus as a form of entertainment had become "respectable" did not necessarily mean that American society was okay with their children becoming a part of the circus themselves.

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[14] Davis, "The Circus Americanized," 40.
[15] Ibid., 42.
[16] Jennifer Lemmer Posey, "The American Circus Spectacle," in *The American Circus*, eds. Susan Weber, Kenneth Ames, and Matthew Wittmann (New Haven: Yale University Press, for the Bard Graduate Center, New York, 2012), 311.
[17] Anthony E. Rotundo, "Introduction: Toward a History of American Manhood," in *American Manhood: Transformations in Masculinity from the Revolution to the Modern Era* (New York: Basic Books, 1993), 3-5.
[18] West, 268.

Chapter 1

The Circus for Children

> What every boy expected to do, some time or other, was to run off . . .
> [but] none of the boys ever did run off, except the son of one of the preachers. . . .
> He was found homesick and crying in Cincinnati, and was glad to come back.
>
> —W. D. Howells, *A Boy's Town*, 1890

Attending the circus with children and families was predominantly accepted and approved by the general public by the golden age. While the institution was no longer viewed as utterly immoral, however, that did not exactly mean that everyone believed its performers' way of life was something to which everyone should aspire. Most people could sit back, enjoy the show, and watch strangers perform dangerous stunts in revealing clothing while excusing their attendance as a learning experience—but that did not mean that they fully respected and valued the actual performers themselves. No matter how much a person may claim on the outside to accept or even love something, their true feelings can often be seen in how they react to the prospect of their own child becoming a part of that thing; many people liked going to the circus, but most of them did not want children joining. Newspapers reported stories of children who attempted to join the circus but it ended badly, and religious leaders and authors detailed the detriments that could occur should a child join. Some stories, though, did acknowledge the benefits of circus life and expressed children's positive view of the circus. By examining the way adults presented the circus to children, and urged them—people for whom they wanted best—not to join, we can see the negative ways in which people viewed circus workers at their core during the nineteenth century.

The idea of running off and joining the circus was a notion that entered the mind of nearly every child in every town across America when the show made its yearly visit. It was a concept so popular in the imaginations of children, in the pages of literature they read, in the posters they saw, that it has endured to this day as a sort of cultural metaphor still referenced on occasion to describe the desire of wanting to leave one's life and everything behind to embark on a new and exciting adventure. A lot of circus media told kids enchanting stories about youngsters going off to join the circus as often as adults gave them speeches about the dangers and immorality of doing so. Among children living in the golden age of the American circus, there were few to whom the idea of running off to the circus did not occur; though many of the cultural references of this trope are from fiction, there were plenty of young people who really did want to run off to the circus.

Few children, though, actually ended up joining. In the introduction, I explained the rough environment of the early circus and why people did not think it suitable for children to attend, and there were some people who maintained this way of thinking in the golden age. The reasons that people would not want children joining include all those mentioned previously regarding attendance, and then some. Some of those who did join, though—or at least tried to—would be made examples of in publications as what not to do. The chapter epigraph is from *A Boy's Town*, a book by W. D. Howells that reads like a novel but is meant to be an autobiographical account of the author's childhood. In this, Howells explains that, while all of his childhood friends wanted to join the circus, none of them ever actually did so, save for one; this boy was then found "homesick and crying in Cincinnati," a nearby city, "and was glad to come back."[19]

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[19] W. D. Howells, *A Boy's Town* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1890; Project Gutenberg, 2009), chap. 9. https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/28727; Ellen Butler Donovan, "The Circus in Nineteenth-Century American Children's Literature," in *The American Circus*, eds. Susan Weber, Kenneth Ames, and Matthew Wittmann (New Haven: Yale University Press, for the Bard Graduate Center, New York, 2012), 333-339.

Newspapers also sometimes published accounts of children's circus exploits resulting in failure that would be perfect for parents to read to their kids as cautionary tales. An 1881 article tells of teenage siblings who apparently joined a circus after becoming "completely fascinated by what they witnessed" at a show. The sister, "fearing her sex would stand in the way of her designs, donned a shabby suit belonging to her brother and succeeded in securing a situation with him without betraying her identity." The parents, "frantic with grief," were unable to locate the duo. The siblings remained away from home for a full year before returning. They said their actual time in the circus was short, and "the glitter and tinsel of the business fad[ed] away at every step." The impatient manager grew tired of them and "set them adrift" to be "alone and in a strange city" not two months after they had joined, "left without a friend and with only $5." A series of unhappy events ensued as a result of their decision to run off. The only job the kids could get was on a brig, and it was "anything but pleasant, the crew being boisterous and their employer utterly brutal." They snuck away once the boat docked without even getting paid, the boy got sick, and "their situation was becoming critical" before a nun took them in and got them on their way home.[20]

An 1888 article tells of a girl who wanted to join but was convinced to abandon the idea immediately. She "exhibited more than ordinary interest in the show" and, after the show ended, remained in her seat "weeping . . . on the verge of hysterics," refusing to leave. The girl's mother was made distraught by her daughter's actions and told the circus owner that the girl, who "was evidently a person of refinement," had lately been suffering with "violent nervous headaches" that had "unhinged her mind"; she was now "possessed of the mania to become a circus performer and was unwilling to leave the building until she had secured an engagement as a bare back ride." The proprietor, to dissuade the girl, led her to an unsaddled horse that she was not even able to mount

[20] "They Joined a Circus," *Georgia Weekly Telegraph and Georgia Journal & Messenger* (Macon), Oct. 28, 1881, Nineteenth Century U.S. Newspapers (Gale Primary Sources).

because of the horse's "series of antics which were simply appalling." The owner told the girl to hurry up, but "the young lady had had enough of the circus," gave up, and left. Apparently, stunned by the difficulty of with working for the circus, the "hysterical" but proper young lady no longer wanted any part of it. There is a good chance of this story being entirely false, but it nonetheless demonstrates the nineteenth-century view against children, especially girls, joining the circus.[21]

One teenage girl, rather than hating her circus experience, loved it—but it drove her to wickedness. In 1889, fourteen-year-old Matilda put an entire tablespoon each of arsenic rat poison into her mother's and stepfather's tea after she had "cast her fortunes with a cowboy combination and was brought home against her will." The girl confessed that she "saw no way to continue on the high road to fame that she had selected other than by removing her parents, and she acted accordingly" in hopes of being able to return to the circus. The parents' condition was "serious," though I could not find an update regarding this precursor of (the alleged) Miss Borden's.[22]

Religious voices were a particularly strong force in denouncing children's participation in the circus, and many parents in the community would likely have listened. According to an 1882 article, an Illinois Sunday school superintendent "warned the children against attending the circus, which he said was a wicked thing, and, to better emphasize his exhortation, asked if there were any in that school who were so utterly depraved as to desire to attend a circus." The man then asked for any children that wanted to attend to stand up, and "every child in the room rose, except

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[21] The girl's age is not specified, but she is referred to as both a "girl" and "young woman" and is portrayed as acting very childish, so she is probably a teenager. I say that this story is very likely fake because the proprietor apparently refused to name the girl and her mother but claimed that their family name was "a very well known one in New York," which comes across as very suspicious to me. The entire thing reads like a story that was made up to discourage girls from attempting to join the circus—which, if so, would be even more convincing of this negative view than simply reporting a true story would be. "Wanted to Join the Circus," *Atchison Daily Champion* (Atchison, KS), Jan. 19, 1888, Nineteenth Century U.S. Newspapers (Gale Primary Sources).

[22] "Multiple News Items: Poisoned Her Parents," *St. Paul Daily News*, Apr. 18, 1889, America's Historical Newspapers (Readex); "Poisoned Her Parents: A Michigan Chippy Who Wanted to Join the Cowboys," *Sacramento Daily Union*, Apr. 19, 1889, California Digital Newspaper Collection, Center for Bibliographical Studies and Research, University of California, Riverside.

a blind girl. The superintendent believes in total depravity now." If a community figure such as this did not even want children *attending* the circus, he certainly would not want them joining it.[23]

Children's literature, especially texts with overt themes or undertones of religion, also cautioned children against circus life. Sunday schools tracts warned both boys and girls. In one text published in 1827 and then again in the 1850s, the father of the boys in the story gives the children several reasons as to why they should not try to join. Some of these are more objective, like the cruelty to animals that occurred, but he also tells the children how those who work for the circus are "idle and worthless people" who drink and gamble. The text also says that boys who go to see the circus inevitably want to imitate the performers, which results in them either actually running away or getting injured while attempting to do tricks on their own.[24]

Another religious publication from 1844 features a girl who is curious about the circus, only for it to be explained to her as a place where women alongside men "spend their time dressing gaudily, and riding about from place to place, to exhibit themselves" instead of "living quietly and soberly, staying much at home, and wearing the ornaments of meek and quiet spirits, as the Bible commands them." The text then directly addresses its young readers and says that the circus is an awful waste of time and money (which they could instead spend on a Bible), is far from honorable and respectable work, and that people should not even so much as attend the circus because those who are a part of it do not deserve any support. It even suggests that children should participate in something that is beneficial to their minds and bodies instead (as if extreme gymnastics and horseback riding are not).[25]

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[23] "A Sunday school superintendent . . .," *Daily Inter Ocean* (Chicago), July 13, 1882, Nineteenth Century U.S. Newspapers (Gale Primary Sources). This is just one of many examples of priests denouncing the circus in general. For another, see p. 9.
[24] Donovan, "The Circus in Nineteenth-Century American Children's Literature," 336-337.
[25] Ibid.

Not only did the circus corrupt children's morals, but it also treated children badly in the form of child labor and outright abuse, according to numerous late nineteenth-century stories. Professor of children's literature Ellen Butler Donovan argues that in James Otis's *Toby Tyler, or Ten Weeks with a Circus*, an 1880 fictional serial containing what is "by far the most famous circus in nineteenth-century children's literature," the author puts forth a "highly charged argument by linking Toby's [circus] labor with slavery." The way in which protagonist Toby's eventual escape from the circus is described is very reminiscent of novels about escape from slavery and actual slave narratives. Toby is treated harshly by his trainers and is viewed simply as a laborer providing "a source of income." Of course, child labor was not viewed as an outright bad thing (farm work, for instance, was fit for a child); the sort of work done in the circus, though, was much more complicated, and the abuse could be much worse than the accepted degree of corporal punishment. In another story, a child is tossed about, shaken, and struck by his own circus family. Another includes a knife-throwing act where the one against the target board is a young girl. The vast majority of authors depicted circus children as disliking (if not hating) and even fearing this labor they were made to perform at best, and being cruelly abused over it at worst.[26]

An 1890 article tells of how a woman named Amye Reade witnessed a teenage circus girl getting whipped every time she failed at a horse-riding trick she was practicing. Appalled, Reade

[26] Real abuse allegations surely inspired these stories; considering the lack of federal child labor laws prior to 1938, as Tiny Kline points out in her memoir, horribly poor treatment of circus children would not have been a huge surprise. The Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, for example, rescued a child slack-rope walker from a New York City theater in 1875, an event recounted on the front page of the *New York Times* which Donovan believes "likely prompted" the Alcott novel discussed ahead. This "incident sparked attention about the plight of child performers," and in 1876, New York state passed laws banning the use of child performers. Of course, not everyone obeyed the law, and Alcott's book references this: it is "against the law to have small boys now; it's so dangerous and not good for them." Ibid., 339-343; Tiny Kline, *Circus Queen and Tinker Bell: The Memoir of Tiny Kline*, ed. Janet M. Davis (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2008), 170.

went undercover and joined the circus herself, biding her time until "the circus-folk became careless of her presence and threw company behavior to the winds." Reade then wrote about her findings in a book entitled *Ruby: A Novel, Founded on the Life of a Circus Girl.*[27] She explains how girls in England are "sold into slavery" under "the respectable name of apprenticeship." Essentially signed over by their parents and then indentured to the circus until they are twenty-one, girls experienced years of "hard work, drudgery, blows, torture, confinement, and no pay, on and on without pause." Once a girl aged out of her obligation, she was turned out into the world with no skills other than how to ride a circus horse, which was in fact a useless skill at that point because any circus trainer could simply hire another, younger girl instead. Besides, a trainer kept the girl's costumes, horse, etc., leaving her penniless, homeless, and friendless "with all doors closed to her. O cruel, cruel!" *Ruby*, being a fictional story, is not meant to be entirely accurate, but it is meant to reveal many of the abuses that actually occurred. This newspaper article itself even admits that "the word 'sensational' has been thrown at this book," but that this has apparently been done only by "ignorant people who forget that a thing may be sensational and may yet, alas, be true." Whether everything or nothing in *Ruby* is true (including the inspiration for it), it seems, could not be widely agreed upon. But either way, anyone who read this novel must have been horrified by the possibilities of what could happen to their child if they were to join the circus.[28]

Another contemporary article tells about a "misunderstanding" regarding possible abuse to a child who was attending the circus. The whole thing was apparently "brought about by John Henry Young," a Black boy from the local area in Augusta, Georgia, "who knows a thing or two

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[27] This entire experience actually took place within a circus in England and not America, but I still include it; this is because circuses frequently traveled between the United States and Europe (and other continents), undoubtedly shared some similarities, and therefore both had involvement in this issue beyond just the United States. Also (and foremost), since it was recounted in an American newspaper, some Americans would have still been aware of it.

[28] "Circus Children," *Women's Penny Paper* (London), 2.80 (May 3, 1890): 333, Gerritsen Women's History Collection of Aletta H. Jacobs, ProQuest.

about horses [and was] trying to ride the trick mule." The circus made the "usual offer" of a reward for anyone who could ride the mule, and Young accepted. While he was riding, however, the trainer was whipping the animal to make it "more difficult to ride," and some audience members, who presumably could not see what was going on all too well, thought that the boy may have been getting hit by the whip too. The man then *did* end up striking Young in the eye, though apparently by accident. The audience quickly spread rumors that the trainer had "deal[t] foully with the negro" on purpose to prevent him from winning the money. The police interfered and calmed the crowd before a full riot could ensue. Though this incident probably was an accident (if the newspaper is to be believed), this is just another instance of a child being injured by a circus worker. Locals would have heard about this, and many other towns may have had their own similar stories. This boy was not even part of the circus, but he was injured when he was participating in it briefly—if injury could come to him just in just a few minutes, how much more harm might children experience fully working in the circus? Few parents would have wanted to take that chance.[29]

Other children's literature was ambivalent about circus life for young people. A lot of it did lean towards the negative, but the subject is more complicated than a simple endorsement or condemnation. The circus often served as a metaphor for adult society at large; the message to keep children from participating in the circus fit into a wider message about the relatively new idea of the preservation of childhood innocence. Authors argued that, for adults, the circus brought the outside world, but for children, the circus also brought the adult world (from which they should be

[29] "Hot Times at the Circus," *Augusta Chronicle*, Jan. 21, 1888, America's Historical Newspapers (Readex).

protected). For example, a Louisa May Alcott novel from the 1870s does show some positive aspects to circus life, but ultimately concludes that a pastoral farm life is the superior situation for a child. There is no domesticity in the circus, she and contemporary authors contended; the "found family" provided by the circus was just not comparable to the nuclear family children required to grow up properly. Children were also "cautioned that the circus is deceptive—false in its advertising and masking with a veneer of beauty and grace the brutal labor of circus life."[30]

Though Alcott's main character eventually chooses an ordinary life, his circus experience has some benefits: he has entertaining stories to tell, he has tricks he can perform, and he has learned valuable life skills like "patience and determination" that help him with his school work. Several nonfiction pieces were also written for children, such as a pair of informative essays by William Stoddard detailing the circus behind the scenes. Stoddard notes the patience and persistence of performers, the organization and planning from crew, and the "hard, anxious labor" done by everyone. Through his "demystification" of the circus and his "deromanticizing" of the work behind it, he manages to relate circus labor to domestic labor. The matter-of-fact explanations of circus duties along with illustrations of circus people performing regular household tasks help to "domesticate" daily circus life and "emphasize practice and hard work." Stoddard also cautions children against rushing into the circus, but mainly because they do not have the work ethic, dedication, and commitment required of circus folk. In this way, he implicitly praises circus workers; young boys with "circus-fever" and "heads full of dime-novel ideas of circus life, its 'adventures' and its 'glories,'" only wanted the fun side of circus life. He explains that they knew "nothing at all . . . of the hard work, severe training, wearying repetitions, and terrible risks of injury and life-long maiming that must be undergone before a manager will allow a performer to

[30] Donovan, 335-344.

appear in public."[31] Perhaps, then, a few texts implied that it might have been acceptable for adults to be in the circus, but it still was not a place for young people.

Even circus adventure stories were permeated by gender roles. Children regardless of gender viewed the circus as an exciting escape, but there were far more books about boys wanting to join; even in books that did show girls' yearning, usually only boys actually joined. Independent fictional boys set off on their own adventures and returned home at the end, "where a moral about family could ensue—after the reader, and the book's hero, had enjoyed [the] circus." Fictional girls, though, never left to begin with; they stayed behind to fulfill their "'proper' role as the 'light of the home'" and "transform" their "relatives and neighborhood." Girls, too, "envision[ed the] circus and thus a grown-up life" that did "not involve the restrictions of the traditional home and town," "looking into a foreign world" that came to town only briefly as "something to hold in memory but not to join." But ultimately, unlike boys, girls "might only dream about going."[32] This Victorian desire to protect childhood innocence extended to femininity in particular; the circus was especially not a place for girls.

Despite the negative messaging that has just been discussed, children would have become familiar with positive, lighthearted circus stories; roughly four hundred novels about kids seeing or joining the circus were later published between 1880 and 1940 that helped familiarize children with the idea of escaping to the circus. These books cemented themselves as "an influential part of growing up after 1880" and inspired many children to want to join, to go somewhere where anything was possible and they could forge their own identities away from where they grew up. When children—boys—joined the circus, they did so for adventure, freedom, and independence.[33]

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[31] Ibid., 338, 345-346.
[32] Adams and Keene, *Women of the American Circus,* 39-42.
[33] Ibid., 36, 39.

Any number of seemingly insignificant incidents could make these underlying feelings manifest, real or in books; not being allowed to spend time with friends or having to do chores around the house could be the last straw. In *A Boy's Town*, some kids were not allowed to go swimming "as often as they wanted"; some were made to carry in wood or weed the garden. They would supposedly never have to do this in the circus—kids viewed the circus as freedom from domestic duties, not as labor in itself. These children were not abused at home, and none of these things on their own, "in a simple form, [were] enough to make a boy run off." They, though, "prepared his mind for it," and when angered by parents, it could send them running for the circus.[34]

Marketing directly from circuses could draw children in as well, especially posters. Circuses certainly encouraged children to attend, though they did not advertise asking them to join. But after being enticed to see the show, many children wanted more, wanted to be a part of it. In *A Boy's Town*, Howells recalls studying circus posters in advance of the show to later compare to the actual performance. When the circus came to town, he viewed the women and men in the parade with "magnificence," and his peers fetched water for workers "just for the glory of coming close to the circus-men." After the circus left town and the children went home, they put on their own little circuses with their friends. "The great trouble" about doing this, though, was that "so many fellows wanted to belong [that] there were hardly any left to form an audience." Despite adults' denunciation of the institution, every child wanted to be like the circus folk.[35]

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[34] Howells, *A Boy's Town* chap. 9; Donovan, 332-333.

[35] A few posters marketed specifically to children. One 1896 Barnum & Bailey poster depicts a peacefully sleeping child with colorful visions of circus acts around them, the text proclaiming that "this smiling face is multiplied a million times a year." Another from 1883 shows children riding on top of Jumbo the elephant, "the children's mute friend on whose broad back the royal children and people of all classes have ridden." Donovan, 332-333.

Unlike many adults in the nineteenth century, children viewed circus workers with reverence and respect. No matter how many adults told them that circus folk were "idle and worthless people," kids idolized them. Children heard many stories about the circus, and as we saw with *A Boy's Town*, they were also inspired by advertisements like circus posters. As for adults, many believed that circus work was inappropriate, and some were still hesitant about the show as a whole. Circuses, though, had a carefully-crafted agenda to convey; they wanted people (including—especially—adults) to perceive them a certain way, they wanted to be seen as respectable enough for adults to attend and bring their children, and they overlooked no detail in constructing their promotional materials in a way that would influence viewer perception of their business. A combination of external publicity and circus marketing that served these goals will be examined in the following chapters.

Chapter 2

Risky, Risqué, Respectable: Presenting Women in the Big Show[36]

> The big yellow-ribbed Bengal tiger snarled in cattish fashion and slunk back into the shifting-box. He didn't want to go and flashed his long, four-inch, yellow-fang teeth to emphasize the objection. But he had to obey his trainer and he knew it. And, what was more to his disgrace, the trainer was a woman—a little and pretty woman at that. Her name, the program said, was Mabel Stark.
>
> —*The Tucson Citizen*, October 31, 1921

Far more adults actually joined the circus than did children, and media depictions presented them rather differently, especially women. For most of the nineteenth century, public opinion of women's roles in the circus was critical of their mere presence, let alone participation and conduct. Many people felt that these women should not be independent workers doing jobs that inherently required them to show off their bodies. As the golden age began and the twentieth century arrived, though, people became a lot more accepting of circus women in line with increasingly progressive social ideas. Women's costumes, evident on posters, gradually became more revealing, continually pushing what gender norms deemed respectable. Intense circus marketing convincingly reframed the role of female performers, affirming their rectitude using tactics like domesticity narratives. Liberated, successful working women even rose to stardom. Women under the big top went from plainly provocative to only subtly seductive over time, all under the pretext of unconventional but sincere morality and decorum. Ultimately, circuses and the performing women themselves had to strategically balance their allure and propriety to appropriately attract crowds of all categories.

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[36] The "big show" refers to the main show under the big top, as opposed to any sideshows, the menagerie, etc. Adams and Keene, 115.

The environment of the early circus was a rather unsavory one filled with rowdy crowds of rowdy men.[37] Women's very attendance at a circus was seen as inappropriate, let alone their being *in* one. Confined to the domestic sphere, women did not have nearly the public presence that men did, especially in venues of entertainment. Just as a woman would not be seen drinking and gambling with men at a bar, neither would she be seen at a circus. The attitude of newspapers, language of advertisements, and references made in autobiographies further prove this to be true, as do photographs available beginning in the 1880s.[38]

The circus was not only morally suspect; it was dangerous, too. Once women did begin to attend, papers published reports of them being injured at the circus, physically and emotionally. Headlines recounted when tents had collapsed and "Men Fight Women to Get Free," trampling them in a scramble. Audiences of thousands witnessed acrobats falling to their deaths, no doubt a traumatizing scene for the ever-emphasized "women and children" spectators.[39] One drawing in an 1859 newspaper depicts a female patron "frightfully lacerated" by a tiger as others try to get it off of her.[40] All of these things, stress Katherine H. Adams and Michael L. Keene in their book on women in the American circus, "could be avoided by remaining at home." Papers painted a circus scene where "these vulnerable visitors probably should not have been." And while the press was not as critical of the overall moral character of the circus by this point, they sometimes did still "cast an aura of seediness and danger over the circus" in which women "should not be embroiled, not even as audience members and"—importantly—"certainly not as cast members."[41]

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[37] Ibid., 24.
[38] West, 265-267.
[39] Adams and Keene, 25-26.
[40] Brett Mizelle, "Horses and Cat Acts in the Early American Circus," in *The American Circus*, eds. Susan Weber, Kenneth Ames, and Matthew Wittmann (New Haven: Yale University Press, for the Bard Graduate Center, New York, 2012), 267.
[41] Adams and Keene, 25-26.

This concern did not always apply, though, to the women *in* the circus. Newspapers, Adams and Keene observe, tended to imply that circus women were "not worthy of concern and protection as were normal women." The circus woman "lived for risk," almost "sought to be hurt" in her dangerous line of work, and was "not a professional doing a dangerous job as carefully as possible, but an irresponsible thrill-seeker." The general tone of publications such as these, they argue, "seemed to imply a general distrust of women who were out and about, as consumers and workers, risking health and reputation in ways they would not be within their homes." One article writes that a star who fell from a trapeze had "always refused to use a net," conveying a sort of accusatory tone that seems to emphasize her recklessness rather than her desire to provide the most entertaining, high-stakes show possible. When a performer was injured or even died, articles frequently chose to emphasize the crowd first, and then the injured performer. An article headlined "10,000 See Women Die in Detroit Circus Trapeze Act" (1931) describes in the first paragraph the spectator reaction, and then the woman's details in the second paragraph. "Fall from Trapeze Kills Girl in Circus" (1932) again describes the audience reaction in the first paragraph, and then finally gives the two women's names and injuries in the second. "5,000 See Acrobat Injured at Circus" (1935) continues the pattern, and so on.[42]

In one of the many articles that detailed a riot, the drama of the fight itself is placed foremost, like one from 1891 that read at the top, "RIOTOUS TOWNSMEN ATTACK A CIRCUS. / [Employees] Pursued to Their Train by an Infuriated Mob. / REVOLVERS AND CLUBS USED. / One of the Female Performers Was Seized by the Crowd and Dragged Around the Ring. / THREE MEN FATALLY HURT." This does make sense since the entire fight was quite the "scene of a bloody riot" resulting in newsworthy serious injuries, but the female

[42] Ibid., 24-27.

performer who was assaulted got only a single short sentence in the entire article. In fairness to the paper, they did not know if the injuries to her or the other canvasmen were serious (the circus managed to flee), but it shows what the reporter felt was most important.[43]

Other times, newspapers did focus mainly on the actual women injured in headlines and at the beginning of a story, although the audience was also still a point of note. In "A YOUNG WOMAN PERFORMER IN CIRCUS FALLS 60 FEET" (1909), the first three paragraphs talk about the impressiveness of the act and its performer, Miss Mae Scott. The paper provides Scott's own explanation about how she "was precipitated to the ground," saying that "the property men who rigged the ladder [from which she fell] neglected to fasten properly certain guy lines" which "caused the ladder to swing sideways after it reached a certain height." The article, though, does make sure to stop and interrupt itself halfway through with a bold section header announcing how hundreds of children and "**WOMEN ARE UNNERVED**" by the incident. This effectively emphasizes the harm to the dainty women in the audience and, by implied extension, to any of its readers who could have found themselves in that spectator position.[44]

In 1906, a "Woman Rider is Nearly Killed" after she ran into a stay wire and "literally r[o]se from her saddle and topple[d] off backwards in the dust of the ring," all "in full view of the thousands who attended." After being thrown from her horse, she was seemingly run over and knocked unconscious. Spectating "women and men" alike "turned their faces, expecting that the woman would be trampled beyond all semblance of recognition," but she survived.[45] Another woman is mentioned by her full name in a subheadline: "Anne Patterson, Swinging By Her Teeth,

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[43] When talking about the circus in general (especially as opposed to townspeople, who were more often than not the instigators of riots), this article and many others from its time actually tended to be rather fair to circuses, treating them with neutral rather than negative language (in contrast to pointedly anti-circus literature). "Riotous Townsmen Attack a Circus," *New York Herald*, May 28, 1891, America's Historical Newspapers (Readex).

[44] "A Young Woman Performer in Circus Falls 60 Feet," *Evening News* (San Jose), May 10, 1909, America's Historical Newspapers (Readex).

[45] "Woman Rider is Nearly Killed," *Tucson Citizen*, Oct. 3, 1906, America's Historical Newspapers (Readex).

Falls Fifty Feet." The article opens by saying that, "while thousands of spectators looked on here last night," her rigging broke and she fell to what may yet lead to her death.[46] Many articles did place most of the attention on the woman injured and merely made mention of audience size, including details to make the event easier to picture and more interesting to read about. However, while articles did report injuries to female performers, they sometimes seemed to be written in a way that implied more care for the women in the audience than for those performing.

Other articles, though, do give respect and praise to these performers. In the one about Scott's fall, the "bruises and cuts . . . sprain of her right wrist, fracture of two ribs, badly wrenched back and possible internal injuries" are detailed. The "customary" use of a net "was not observed" by fault of the circus, not Scott herself. Her character is also commended: "although suffering intense pain," she "bore up well under the treatment." She "calmly related what she believed to be the cause of the accident" and told a friend to "warn the other trapeze performers against using her apparatus until it could be tested." Scott is described as resilient, logical, and considerate of others.[47] Another woman, Martha Florene, was attacked by a leopard. She was not accused of recklessness for working a dangerous job, but was "a victim of the savage instincts of a wild animal which she had trained since its infancy." The animal, "her dumb brute betrayer," was fully at fault. She defended her cats in her "optimistic reply," and she possessed a "sympathetic spirit with regard to what she terms her 'animal friends.'" The article concludes by describing Florene as a "brave little woman" with "grit, courage, and optimism" who will "'pull through' with colors flying."[48] A third piece covers Linda Jeal Julian, a woman who ran a circus school in the off season. "The

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[46] "Circus Queen Injured in Her 'Slide for Life,'" *Macon Telegraph*, Oct. 16, 1920, America's Historical Newspapers (Readex).
[47] "A Young Woman Performer in Circus Falls 60 Feet."
[48] "Circus Woman Still Loves Wild Leopards That Mutilated Her," *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*, Sep. 15, 1917, America's Historical Newspapers (Readex). Her surname was actually spelled "Florine": Cecilia Rasmussen, "Cagey Entertainer's Life Was a 3-Ring Circus," *Los Angeles Times*, Sep. 29, 2002, https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-2002-sep-29-me-then29-story.html.

strangest part of the whole thing" was her gender, but nothing negative is said about her. She is "quick-witted," "well liked," a "thorough business woman"; had been a "star rider with some of the biggest and best shows" and "won great favor by her daring feats" in previous years; and coaches her trainees to perform with the most famous circuses.[49] Overall, media opinion as to whether or not the circus was a place for women at all was not agreed upon or consistent for many years, but as more and more women began both attending and joining, women performers became an integral and valued part of the circus.[50]

Before the golden age, many people deemed the circus immoral due to the display of performers' bodies. While both men and women were sometimes criticized, women received much more censure, and acts were criticized solely *because* they were performed by women. An 1847 publication maintains, for example, that there is "no harm in" men riding horses in the circus since it is "only part of the performance." Women's performances, though, done while "gaudily dressed, with very short dresses, [women] throwing themselves about in an unbecoming manner" therefore "encourages young women to be fond of gay dress, and to be bold and immodest in manner, and all this in opposition to the word of God." One circus excluded female horse riders from an 1840 advertisement, stating that to include them "is not calculated to advance our interests" because they "mar the harmony of the entertainments, and bring the whole exhibition into disrepute. It never was ordained by Nature that woman should degrade the representatives of her sex which are not calculated for any other than the stalwart male."[51] Nevertheless, people enjoyed watching women's performances, and circuses continued to gain popularity over the following decades.

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[49] "A Woman's Circus School," *Kansas City Star*, May 16, 1904, America's Historical Newspapers (Readex).
[50] Many women began attending circuses at the beginning of the golden age, and women's circus participation also increased dramatically over first few decades of the period. In 1880, women comprised only about two percent of circus troupe; after 1910, they made up more than one third of it. Adams and Keene, 14.
[51] Mizelle, "Horses and Cat Acts in the Early American Circus," 271-272.

This leads to the next point that perhaps best encapsulates the treatment of circus performers, especially women: they were shamed for their work, yet also desired for their allure. Just as the word *circus* itself is reminiscent of Roman times, so too is this opinion of circus women, not so unlike stage performers of ancient Rome being conflated with prostitutes and degraded while at the same time having both services of "selling their bodies" demanded and enjoyed.[52] Things did get better over the years; massive improvements were made in how circus women were seen, and performers gained more respect and freedom alongside—if not ahead of—women in wider society. But the image of an enticing woman used to draw in paying customers has been a forever enduring one in many areas, and once it finally became acceptable to show this in print advertisements, circuses used it to their full advantage.

The turning point in public opinion on circus women corresponded with the rise of the New Woman ideal.[53] This concept of the New Woman began to appear and gain traction around the same time that the American circus entered its golden age, the 1880s. While the only acceptable public work for women had previously been domestic-type occupations, the New Woman showed a "distressing disinterest in the female domestic sphere—especially an overt disgust with housework . . . and a shocking desire for 'fellowship' with men." This New Woman was determined to put her talents to use, even if that meant doing so in "man's sphere." Many people, of course, disapproved of women's "loss of moral decency and grace" and their disinterest in

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[52] Many Romans in sex work and entertainment jobs experienced social exclusion under *infamia*. See Anne Duncan, "Infamous Performers: Comic Actors and Female Prostitutes in Rome," in *Prostitutes and Courtesans in the Ancient World,* eds. Christopher A. Faraone and Laura K. McClure (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2006), 252.
[53] Paul Stirton, "American Circus Posters," in *The American Circus*, eds. Susan Weber, Kenneth Ames, and Matthew Wittmann (New Haven: Yale University Press, for the Bard Graduate Center, New York, 2012), 130.

marriage and conventional standards of feminine decorum. In "completely abandoning" their natural post of mother and wife, these women had apparently "gone too far." They persisted, though, and social progress for women marched on.[54]

Though many initially rejected this new attitude of the New Woman, its values became more accepted, and so did women's roles in the circus. Eventually, the display of the human body, especially the female body, performing such physically demanding feats came to stand not for something solely scandalous but for an intriguing and admirable showcasing of feminine beauty. The New Woman was "athletic, confident, educated, and independent,"[55] and these aspects—especially athleticism—were emphasized not just to be obscene but to highlight the discipline and strength made evident in her body. Barnum & Bailey were quick to take advantage of this—"follow[ing] the lead of every other up-to-date enterprise and mak[ing] room for the new woman," as one newspaper put it—by creating a separate ring in their 1895 and 1896 shows filled with an all-female cast of ringmaster, equestriennes, trapeze artists, and clowns.[56]

This shift is evident in the evolution of women's costumes. Posters provide abundant examples of what women wore during performances, as well as how they were presented overall. The way that circus women's bodies were clothed underwent significant changes over the decades that paralleled the changes in public opinion about their acts, but often continued to push the limits by keeping one step ahead of what contemporary proper "society" women were wearing. The difference from the beginning of the golden age in the 1870s to the end in the 1940s is stark.

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[54] Susan M. Cruea, "Changing Ideals of Womanhood During the Nineteenth-Century Woman Movement," *General Studies Writing Faculty Publications* (Sep. 2005): 200, Bowling Green State University, https://scholarworks.bgsu.edu/gsw_pub/.
[55] Stirton, "American Circus Posters," 130.
[56] Quoted in Adams and Keene, 15.

Beginning at the start of the period, we can look to a monochromatic poster dated 1879 which depicts a trio of young women in the ring. They carry crops and wear some form of riding uniform with ruffled dresses that fall to mid-calf, jackets, boots, and hats. The only skin exposed besides their faces is their forearms and hands, and possibly their lower legs, although those likely would have been covered with tights.[57] A myriad of color posters were made in the 1880s and onward, largely by Barnum & Bailey which merged in 1881. Skirts soon began to shorten, though amidst the following couple of decades, there was also a trend of long skirts and even ballroom clothes that lent more glamour to the act. An 1896 poster, for instance, depicts flying trapeze artists with a man in a full suit with tails and women in gowns with short puff sleeves and ribbons. The text draws attention to this fact, pointing out "their astonishing high trapeze long skirt evolutions, leaps and dives."[58] Art historian Paul Stirton points out another example of this in a poster of the Hungarian Kőnyőt family, where both men and women wear full evening clothes while balancing stood up on galloping horses. They are even pictured in the center of the poster sitting for a portrait in a parlor, furthering the domestic, formal theme. Another poster depicts the Kőnyőts identical to the last in the center and right drawings, while the left drawing keeps the same positioning but changes their outfits to be military-style (skirts reach just below the knee with tights).[59]

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[57] "Three women in arena," 1879, poster, Francis & Valentine, Library of Congress, 2017650854, online.
[58] "Flying Wonders, the Arrigosi Sisters," Adam Forepaugh and Sells Brothers, 1896, poster, Strobridge Lithographing Company, the Ringling Museum, Sarasota, ht2000553, online.
[59] The military poster likely came after the other one since, while they are both dated 1909, the other one states on it that it is the family's "First American Appearance" whereas the second one does not. Stirton states that actual performance in such clothing would have been very difficult, so it might be the case that the family was only drawn in evening clothes but did not actually perform in them, though it also could have been an actual "distinctive feature of their act." The jackets in the second poster match those worn by the group in a 1911 photograph, so the Kőnyőts did wear them at some point. Either, then, both the formal and the military costumes were worn during their act and the 1911 photo only shows one of them, or only the military attire was ever worn (and this second poster was then updated to partially reflect this) and the drawings in evening wear were purely for advertising purposes. Without photographic evidence, it is impossible to prove that these women did perform in full gowns, though they could have. That they were advertised as such, though, is what matters for the purposes of this paper. Stirton, 131-132; "The Kőnyőt Family," Barnum & Bailey, 1909, poster, Strobridge Lithographing Company, the Ringling Museum, Sarasota, ht2000299, online; "The Six Konyots: Hungarian Riders," ca. 1911, photograph, reproduced in Stav Meishar, "Past: Arthur Konyot," *The Escape Act: A Holocaust Memoir*, Feb. 23, 2019, online.

Excepting that trend, the amount of fabric that performers wore steadily decreased over the decades. These new lighter and tighter costumes made sense: they would allow much better freedom of movement, lessen the risk of excess cloth catching on something, and remove cumbersome excess material from the performer's body (of which they required maximum precision and control). Other posters from the 1880s and 1890s show women in costumes similar to that of the one from the 1870s, but without the jackets and with skirts closer to knee-length. One from 1882 depicts a woman somersaulting on horseback in a knee-length dress with a bertha neckline. An 1897 poster shows two equestriennes, the Meers Sisters, dressed similarly in knee-length dresses with bertha necklines and opera gloves to match their colored tights.[60]

Around the turn of the century, skirts evolved from knee-length to non-existent in many cases. While some long dresses remained as explained above, many outfits began to resemble 1920s swimsuits as early as the 1880s. They were fairly form-fitting (but not skintight) and were one piece (or at least appeared as such), but they usually had bloomer-esque puffed shorts and retained the ruffled bertha neckline. Many had square or other deep necklines and were sleeveless with only thick, vertical, sometimes ruffled straps instead of short or off-shoulder sleeves. A few kept the bertha neckline for now. Some women wore colored tights, and some wore either nude or no tights.[61] In a 1907 poster, the bottom part of one woman's costume is cut nearly up to her hips on the sides and goes under between the legs like a leotard. Strongwoman Katie Sandwina is shown

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[60] "Louise Renz," Adam Forepaugh, 1882, poster, Strobridge Lithographing Company, the Ringling Museum, Sarasota, ht2000405, online; "The Meers Sisters, Rose & Ouika," Barnum & Bailey, 1897, poster, Strobridge Lithographing Company, the Ringling Museum, Sarasota, ht2000181, online.

[61] "Bicycles and Unicycles," Barnum & Bailey, 1889, poster, Strobridge Lithographing Company, the Ringling Museum, Sarasota, ht2000048, online; "Zarah," Adam Forepaugh, ca. 1895, poster, Strobridge Lithographing Company, the Ringling Museum, Sarasota, ht2000420, online; "The World Famous Silbons," Barnum & Bailey, ca. 1896, poster, Strobridge Lithographing Company, Library of Congress, 2002695273, online; "World Famous Silbons," Barnum & Bailey, 1896, poster, Strobridge Lithographing Company, the Ringling Museum, Sarasota, ht2000174, online; "Carl Damann Male & Female Acrobats," Forepaugh & Sells Brothers, 1899, poster, Strobridge Lithographing Company, the Ringling Museum, Sarasota, ht2000583, online. For detail about the subject of tights-wearing, see Janet M. Davis, *The Circus Age: Culture & Society Under the American Big Top* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), Ebook, EBSCOHost, 107-110, 139.

in a 1912 poster wearing a skintight leotard with thin shoulder straps. In a 1914 poster, shoulder straps are asymmetrical, and one of them is simply thin ribbon.[62]

By this point, then, the "more revealing but also more vigorous representation of women performers would become the norm," especially "from the 1920s onward."[63] Tighter, more revealing outfits on posters were more faithful to what was realistically worn in actual performance, and they also made shows more alluring as marketers no longer tried to downplay the presence of scandalous women's acts but instead made them a selling feature. Longer dresses continued to appear occasionally, though now in a fashionable 1920s style rather than a Victorian one.[64] Generally, though, the same uniform of low neckline, thin shoulder straps, and very short skirt/shorts bottom continued through the 1920s.[65] By the 1930s, costumes had become truly skintight, now especially resembling swimsuits. These leotards also traded the square neckline for a deep V neck or backless halter top that molded to and exposed the sides of the breasts. The occasional mini dress was thrown in as well.[66] Once the 1940s arrived, costumes split into two

[62] "The Flying Floretta Grigolatis," Ringling Bros., 1907, poster, Strobridge Lithographing Company, the Ringling Museum, Sarasota, ht2001299, online; "Miss Katie Sandwina," Barnum & Bailey, 1912, poster, Strobridge Lithographing Company, the Ringling Museum, Sarasota, ht2000317, online; "Daring High Wire Exploits," Ringling Bros., 1914, poster, Strobridge Lithographing Company, the Ringling Museum, Sarasota, ht2001356, online.
[63] Adams and Keene, 132.
[64] "Have You Seen 'Poodles' and the Hanneford Family," Sells-Floto, 1922, poster, Strobridge Lithographing Company, the Ringling Museum, Sarasota, ht2000711, online; "Ballerinas of the High Wire," Sells Floto, 1923, poster, Strobridge Lithographing Company, the Ringling Museum, Sarasota, ht2000714, online.
[65] "More Than 200 International Lady Artists," Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey, 1920, poster, Strobridge Lithographing Company, the Ringling Museum, Sarasota, ht2001414, online; "4th Generation of World Famous Nelson Family," John Robinson's Circus, 1921, poster, Strobridge Lithographing Company, the Ringling Museum, Sarasota, ht2000905, online; "Beautiful Irene, Queen on Ladder," Sells-Floto, 1921, poster, Strobridge Lithographing Company, the Ringling Museum, Sarasota, ht2004878, online.
[66] "Daring High Wire Exploits," Hagenbeck-Wallace, 1930, poster, Strobridge Lithographing Company, the Ringling Museum, Sarasota, ht2000763, online; Sverre Braathen, "Dorothy Herbert," Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey, 1935, photograph of poster, Circus & Allied Arts collection, Special Collections, Milner Library, Illinois State University, BNP2330, online; Sverre Braathen, "Jennie Rooney," Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey, 1934, photograph of poster, Circus & Allied Arts collection, Special Collections, Milner Library, Illinois State University, BNP1745, online; Sverre Braathen, "Circus Poster," Russel Bros., 1935, photograph of poster, Circus & Allied Arts collection, Special Collections, Milner Library, Illinois State University, BNP2171, online; "June Hollis," John Robinson's Circus, 1930, poster, Illinois Lithograph, the Ringling Museum, Sarasota, ht2000908, online.

pieces to expose the midriff, tops now resembling a bikini top and bottoms consisting of tight shorts with a flouncy miniskirt often overtop.[67]

There were also a few outfits that seemed especially ahead of their time in how revealing they were. One Barnum & Bailey poster drew two women in sleeveless leotards with moderate V necks, but was from 1889.[68] Statue girls were also an outlier as a category; these performers were nearly nude (at least topless with a small lower covering), covered in white body paint, and entirely still to represent classical marble statuary.[69] For the most part, however, the evolution of women's circus costuming followed the general pattern of covering less and less, and it did so several years ahead of the rest of society. By the time the circus was exiting its golden age and Hollywood was entering its, the women on circus posters looked like they could have been movie stars.

As social sentiments shifted and the public began to embrace female performers, circuses worked hard to market their women as the circus's "keystones of moral rectitude." While early advertisements tried to minimize female artists to avoid criticism, golden-age women were made a "critical part of defining the American railroad circus as respectable." Women's bodies, in their increasingly skimpier outfits, were "by the standards of the day . . . nearly nude," but any censure that might have come from this was balanced out by reframing them as "spectacles of discipline

[67] "The Caudillo Sisters," Cole Bros., ca. 1941, poster, U.S. Printing, the Ringling Museum, Sarasota, ht2001998, online; "Marlyn Riche, Lady Gymnast," Cole Bros., ca. 1942, poster, Erie Lithograph, the Ringling Museum, Sarasota, ht2005005, online; "Aerialists," Wallace Bros., 1945, poster, Erie Lithograph, the Ringling Museum, Sarasota, ht2003233, online; "Performing Jaguars, Black and Spotted Leopards and Pumas," Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey, 1945, poster, maker unknown, the Ringling Museum, Sarasota, ht2001756, online.
[68] "Ceiling Walking on Suspended Marble Polished Slab," Barnum & Bailey, 1889, poster, Strobridge Lithographing Company, the Ringling Museum, Sarasota, ht2000024, online.
[69] "8 Lovely Ladies As Living Statues," Adam Forepaugh & Sells Brothers, 1896, poster, Strobridge Lithographing Company, the Ringling Museum, Sarasota, ht2000552, online; "The Greatest Living Statues On Revolving Pedestals," Barnum & Bailey, 1915, poster, Strobridge Lithographing Company, the Ringling Museum, Sarasota, ht2000345, online; Davis, "The Circus Age," 84; Adams and Keene, 86.

and virtue." In an increasingly industrialized, highly capitalistic society founded on values of hard work, they were promoted as hardworking physical laborers and "paragons of wholesome physical beauty."[70] Skill, cultivated by diligent practice, became just as important as beauty; many articles emphasized physical descriptions or performers, but both together was undoubtedly the best case. When these women showcased the product of their training, every leap with bare legs revealed flexibility and grace, every swing with bare arms exposed muscle and strength. Women were no longer "decoration," as one former clown put it in 1924—"they are the headlines," and they had to be good at their jobs. Scholars have argued that the circus "created the first truly national visual depiction of women at work," "seen by an audience of women as well as men and children."[71]

Those who still thought scantily-clad performers to be improper could find other reasons to believe in the morality of circus women: enter, animal trainers. The costumes described above mainly pertained to acrobats and equestriennes, popular subjects for posters. The circus, though, also had a few female animal trainers, and the change in their costuming was rather opposite. At the turn of the century, female cat trainers were often shown in street clothes for photos, unlike the heroic hunter and military costumes of male trainers. There was one woman, called Mademoiselle Vivant, who was "middle-aged" but "described as a 'girl.'" This "application of the label *girl* to a mature female" not only "carried connotations of sexual availability," but also "suggest[ed] someone who was not in full control," argues Peta Tait, scholar of performance theory and the circus. "In contrast to the enhanced social and masculine status accorded male counterparts by a military title," she explains, "the promotion of Vivant denoted social subservience." Here, this

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[70] Davis, "The Circus Americanized," 42-44.

[71] Adams and Keene, 14-16. Regarding beauty, the article discussed above that describes a woman who was knocked off her horse elaborates that she sustained a "cruel gash across her forehead" from where she collided with the wire. She would consequentially "be apt always to carry as a reminder of her terrible fall" in the scar that would surely form, a fact which, the writer seems to convey, is really rather a shame, as she "was quite pretty"—*was*. "Woman Rider is Nearly Killed." See also "A Young Woman Performer in Circus Falls 60 Feet."

"feminized nomenclature and feminine costuming" served to "offset social resistance to the female trainer's usurpation of the masculine activity of taking risks with big wild animals."[72]

While men were hypermasculine dominators of nature, women were natural nurturers and controlled their animals by virtue of their being "nominally closer to the domain of nature and thus animal identity." Tait explains, "a female trainer was accorded less prestige because her feminine identity evoked the possibility of an intuitive understanding of animals and how to calm them." Though these trainers may seem to have "transgressed the limits of gender roles," it was actually "feminine care" that made their ferocious animals tame, effectively downplaying their power over and keeping them safely out of the men's realm of aggressive control of nature. Essentially, men dominated their ferocious animals into obedience; women nurtured them into compliance.[73]

Beginning around the 1920s, female trainers (following the famous Mabel Stark's lead) tended to wear more full-coverage clothing that was similar to their male counterparts' and also more protective from a safety standpoint (a thick jacket would at least protect a *bit* against a graze from tiger claws). The very notion of a woman performing such a dangerous act was shocking and exciting enough regardless of costume—so greatly anticipated by audiences, even, that if a female trainer could not perform for a show, "a male substitute might have to cross-dress to fulfill promotional and audience expectations." Tait includes in her essay a photo of Mabel Stark's teacher in a wig and makeup under his regular military costume (and looking exceedingly unhappy about it). "Here," she says, "the military-style costume signaled masculinity as the performing body faked femininity, so that trainer identity was doubly gendered in the animal act."[74]

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[72] Peta Tait, "Performed Identities as Circus Illusions," in *The American Circus*, eds. Susan Weber, Kenneth Ames, and Matthew Wittmann (New Haven: Yale University Press, for the Bard Graduate Center, New York, 2012), 285-287.
[73] Ibid.
[74] Ibid.

Circuses also loved putting out their own little narratives of their female cast members that, in contrast to the liberated and independent New Woman, made them look as perfectly pure and domestically dainty as could be. Before a show came to town, the advance team, charged with traveling ahead of the main company to promote the show, would give stories to the press to publish that highlighted—or sometimes just fabricated—"domestic" elements of circus women. There were tales of "acrobats and equestriennes who loved to cook and embroider," of "young women who lived under the careful eyes of parents and brothers on the show."[75] Articles like these were also published in magazines read by women and men alike, briefly mentioning what the woman did in her act—say, an incredible feat of flying through the air as a human projectile—before emphasizing what she was doing outside of it—"always knitting or crocheting."[76]

While these details were likely true to some extent (everybody has hobbies and household chores), the intent to minimize the radical elements of these progressive women and instead paint them as the traditional homemaker of the romanticized past is clear. Once, May Wirth, one of the most famous equestriennes of all time, did not get an interview about what it was like to be so wildly successful; the paper instead quoted her talking about how "when a woman can roast a chicken in a chafing dish, serve a square meal upon a dress suit case . . . do a couple of turns every day on the flying trapeze or on a barebacked horse, make all of her circus costumes, darn her husband's socks, and take care of a baby or two," she was, therefore, "entitled to the blue ribbon for housewifeliness" and could "safely be set down as domestic."[77] With all of those other, domestic capabilities, what real significance does doing *a couple of turns every day* have?

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[75] Davis, "The Circus Americanized," 43.
[76] Quoted in Adams and Keene, 33-34.
[77] Ibid.

Proprietors also set codes of conduct for their female employees, and morality clauses in contracts were sometimes publicized to evidence upstanding behavior. Rules for young, single ballet girls from the Ringling Bros. 1912-1913 winter season included no "flirting and boisterous conduct at all times and places," no stopping at hotels in towns ("ladies should be in sleeping cars at a reasonable hour after the night performance"), and no visiting with male employees. They also had to be "neat and modest in appearance" and not dress in "a flashy, loud style." Married women did not have much more freedom, confined to live and socialize only with their husbands. These rules were, apparently, "intended to protect the girls in every possible way." After all, "good order and good behavior are necessary if you are to be comfortable and happy." But in that document, it is also stated—perhaps more honestly—that they matter because "the 'town folks' [are] to feel that the 'show folks' are real men and women and ladies and gentlemen" and not, as Adams and Keene put it, "some lesser or morally suspect other." The rules' main purpose, then, was to "help control what happens among employees" and "help shape the impression made on the public."[78]

And the circus, like Hollywood would, had its own darlings. The circus had many solo acts in addition to troupes, and posters featuring these female stars in the forefront or entirely alone were quite popular. Their names were almost always written in conspicuous text, each one of them a "queen of the ring," each act the "greatest in the world." Some of the most famous women who had their own posters included Lillian Leitzel, acrobat, who was "dainty," an "aerial wonder," and the "world's most marvelous lady gymnast";[79] May Wirth, equestrienne, who possessed "beauty,

[78] Davis, "The Circus Americanized," 43-44; Adams and Keene, 74-75.
[79] "Dainty Miss Leitzel," Ringling Bros., 1918, poster, Strobridge Lithographing Company, the Ringling Museum, Sarasota, ht2001395, online; "Miss Leitzel," Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey, n.d., poster, Strobridge Lithographing Company, the Ringling Museum, Sarasota, ht2001438, online; "Dainty Miss Leitzel," Ringling Bros.

grace, skill, and daring to a high degree" and was "the greatest bare back rider of all time";[80] Dorothy Herbert, equestrienne, billed as the "World's Most Daring Horsewoman," "The Riding Sensation of the Age," "The World's Most Daring and Sensational Rider," and "America's Most Fearless Horse Woman";[81] and Mabel Stark, tiger trainer, the "world's foremost trainer of ferocious jungle beasts."[82] Others with at least one poster praising them were Jennie Rooney, aerialist, "the Most Daring Lady Trapezist of All Time"; Mary Ellen, tightrope walker, "Queen of the Wire"; Janet May, acrobat, the "World's Foremost Aerial Gymnaste"; Helen Girard, "Empress of the Equestrian World, the Recognized Side-Saddle Queen"; Jennie O'Brien, equestrienne, "Greatest Bareback Rider of All Time"; Rosina O'Brien, a multi-talented "Principal Bareback Hurdle Rider, Running Globe Juggler, & the Only Lady Tumbler & Somersaulter in the World"; and even "Evetta, the Only Lady Clown with the Barnum & Bailey Greatest Show on Earth."[83]

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and Barnum & Bailey, 1921, poster, Strobridge Lithographing Company, the Ringling Museum, Sarasota, ht2001427, online; "Dainty Miss Leitzel," Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey, 1926, poster, Strobridge Lithographing Company, the Ringling Museum, Sarasota, ht2001474, online.

[80] "Miss May Wirth," Barnum & Bailey, 1913, poster, Strobridge Lithographing Company, the Ringling Museum, Sarasota, ht2000323, online; "Miss May Wirth, Somersaulting Queen of the Arena," Ringling Bros., 1917, poster, Strobridge Lithographing Company, the Ringling Museum, Sarasota, ht2001375, online; "May Wirth, Bareback Rider," Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey, n.d., poster, Strobridge Lithographing Company, the Ringling Museum, Sarasota, ht2001451, online; "May Wirth," Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey, ca. 1926, poster, Strobridge Lithographing Company, the Ringling Museum, Sarasota, ht2001475, online.

[81] "Dorothy Herbert," Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey, n.d., poster, Erie Lithograph, the Ringling Museum, Sarasota, ht2001534, online; "Dorothy Herbert," Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey, ca. 1930, poster, Erie Lithograph, the Ringling Museum, Sarasota, ht2001526, online; "Sensational Rider Miss Dorothy Herbert," Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey, n.d., poster, Erie Lithograph, the Ringling Museum, Sarasota, ht2001601, online; "Miss Dorothy Herbert," Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey, n.d., poster, Erie Lithograph, the Ringling Museum, Sarasota, ht2001551, online; "Dorothy Herbert, Fearless Horse Woman," Cole Bros., n.d., poster, Erie Lithograph, the Ringling Museum, Sarasota, ht2001953, online; Sverre Braathen, "Dorothy Herbert," Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey, 1935, photograph of poster, Circus & Allied Arts collection, Special Collections, Milner Library, Illinois State University, BNP2330, online.

[82] "Miss Mabel Stark," Al G. Barnes Circus, ca. 1935, poster, Erie Lithograph, the Ringling Museum, Sarasota, ht2001085, online; "The Fearless Mabel Stark," Al G. Barnes Circus, n.d., poster, Central Print & Illinois Lithograph, the Ringling Museum, Sarasota, ht2001046, online; "Mabel Stark Wrestling Rajah her Royal Bengal Tiger," Sells Floto, n.d., poster, Erie Lithograph, the Ringling Museum, Sarasota, ht2000638, online.

[83] "Jennie Rooney," Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey, ca. 1926, poster, Strobridge Lithographing Company, the Ringling Museum, Sarasota, ht2004937, online; "Miss Jennie Rooney," Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey, n.d, poster, Central Print & Illinois Lithograph, the Ringling Museum, Sarasota, ht2001657, online; "Mary Ellen, Queen of the Wire," Kay Bros., n.d, poster, Erie Lithograph, the Ringling Museum, Sarasota, ht2002261, online; "Janet May," Al G. Barnes-Sells Floto and John Robinson Combined Circuses, n.d., poster, Erie Lithograph, the Ringling Museum, Sarasota, ht2001135, online; "Miss Helen Girard," Barnum & Bailey, 1903, poster, Strobridge

The papers, too, loved these precious little ladies. "Lilly Leitzel, the little trapeze performer," remarked one, "is a little wisp of a girl, as cheery as a songbird and the idol of the circus." "Daring Girl is Circus Feature: Lilly Leitzel Defies Death in Sensational Work on High Rope," headlined another, describing her as "a dimpled little creature weighing scarcely 90 pounds and possessing saucy brown curls, which fall in confusion around a pair of dancing eyes" who would "turn and twist and perform her astonishing revolutions while dangling from a single rope suspended in mid-aid [sic]. One slip of the wrist or turn of the toe would be fatal, but the daring little contortionist is not afraid."[84] "Little Miss Lilly Leitzel, tiniest aerialist in circusdom, won her way into the hearts of the audience by the grit displayed in her act at the top of the big top," praised yet another, explaining how her act "calls for her to throw herself clear over her own shoulder while suspended 75 feet in the air. This she does 40 times in rapid succession."

This same article also comments on May Wirth, who "gave a good performance in bare back riding, turning a back sommersault [sic] on a galloping horse." A feature article in 1917 deemed Wirth the "Greatest of Equestrian Stars of the Circus" next to a large image of her. She was a "dainty English girl whose breath taking accomplishments on the back of a galloping horse eclipse all riding achievements in the circus world. . . . She is the only rider among either women or men who can do a 'forward somersault' on a running steed, and she wears a smile that 'won't

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Lithographing Company, the Ringling Museum, Sarasota, ht2000260, online; "Jennie O'Brien, Famous Equestrienne," Cole Bros., n.d., poster, Erie Lithograph, the Ringling Museum, Sarasota, ht2001913, online; "Rosina O'Brien," Barnum & Bailey, 1889, poster, Strobridge Lithographing Company, the Ringling Museum, Sarasota, ht2000043, online; "Evetta, Lady Clown," Barnum & Bailey, 1895, poster, Strobridge Lithographing Company, the Ringling Museum, Sarasota, ht2000167, online.

[84] "Circus Folk Are Jolly but some Bear Burdens under Gilded Trappings," *Idaho Daily Statesman* (Boise), Aug. 17, 1917, America's Historical Newspapers (Readex);
"Daring Girl Is Circus Feature: Lilly Leitzel Defies Death in Sensational Work on High Rope," *Trenton Evening Times*, May 13, 1915, America's Historical Newspapers (Readex).

come off.'" Another article, also with a large picture of her, notes "her remarkable cleverness as a tumbler, doing a series of whirlwind handsprings that are astounding."[85]

An article on Dorothy Herbert interviewed her about her horses and complimented that she "is gifted with a wonderful personality, and practically charms her horses, although she won't admit it. As a matter of fact, her horses won't perform for anyone else."[86] Evidently, the sex appeal these women possessed was heavily balanced out by their girlish charisma and charm. And, despite the explaining away of women trainers' control over animals as due to their "nurturing" nature (as Peta Tait has explained), control them they still did, no matter how it was done. Though a female trainer might have been "little" and in possession of a "gentle manner," there was something about her that could work with animals like men apparently could not. Mabel Stark, one of the most revered trainers and circus women of all, was lauded by a newspaper on Halloween of 1921:

> "Rajah," the big yellow-ribbed Bengal tiger, snarled in cattish fashion and slunk back into the shifting-box. He didn't want to go and flashed his long, four-inch, yellow-fang teeth to emphasize the objection. But he had to obey his trainer and he knew it.
>
> And, what was more to his disgrace, the trainer was a woman—a little and pretty woman at that. Her name, the program said, was Mabel Stark. . . .
>
> For be it known, in the past, the Royal Bengal Tiger—the great, velvety footed man eater of the jungles, has been considered untamable. . . . Always he has defied his arch-enemy—man.
>
> And then came "the woman." She was little, pretty, blonde of hair, with wide-open blue eyes and a gentle manner. And yet, Rajah and his sulking, hulking mates obeyed her. . . . [they] snarl, for why, they ask in their cattish way, should a Royal Bengal mind anyone, especially when "that one" is a woman. But mind they do. They have to. Little Miss Stark makes them.[87]

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[85] "Circus Casts Magic Spell over 16,000," *Idaho Daily Statesman* (Boise), Aug., 17, 1917, America's Historical Newspapers (Readex); "May Wirth, Not 20, but Greatest of Equestrian Stars of the Circus," *Fort-Worth Star Telegram*, Sep. 20, 1917, America's Historical Newspapers (Readex); "Finale of Rider Today: May Wirth, at Orpheum, Does Astounding Tricks," *Morning Oregonian* (Portland), Dec. 7, 1921, America's Historical Newspapers (Readex).

[86] "Prima Donna Horses Need Right Approach," *Heraldo de Brownsville* (Brownsville, TX), Jan. 31, 1940, America's Historical Newspapers (Readex).

[87] "Woman Tames Wild Jungle Bengal Tiger," *Tucson Citizen*, Oct. 31, 1921, America's Historical Newspapers (Readex).

This rebranding of women in the circus could not change human nature, though. A strong element of physical allure remained in these women's lithe, thinly-covered bodies, and it drew people—particularly men—to the show. In many ways, the circus became moral because women are moral creatures and were now a part of it, though circus women also still possessed an element of immorality (the degree of which varied depending on the particular opinions of every individual observer). The difference by the golden age, though, was that the public did not unquestionably view the circus as inherently immoral. For reasons virtuous or not, spectators were safe to ogle the barely-clothed performers in front of them under the guise of taking their families for an educational day of amusements, putting a lot of money in proprietors' pockets in the process. Thanks to careful management by those who ran and performed in circuses, women were able to balance seductiveness and decency in their public images.

Before concluding this chapter, I want to look briefly at how women were represented in fiction, similar to the previous chapter with how the circus was presented to children. This is especially because novels often portrayed a positive view of performers and presented insightful commentary on the situation of circus women, even frequently addressing the motivations that led women to join the circus. As we have seen, fictional children, namely boys, joined for adventure and escape. What did adults, at least those in popular media, join for, then? Their motivations were not too different than those of children, just more grown-up. Dime novels proliferated about the sense of adventure the circus brought, but for adults, that excitement was less that of childhood wonder and escape from one's parents and more about serious risk and career independence.

Stories about men often overlapped with themes of the Wild West, symbolizing a "faraway work world" with "excitement and challenge on the road." The protagonist learned difficult tricks, "hunt[ed] down wild animals or freaks," and "conquer[ed] through his own gumption and luck."[88] This theme of the hunter figure, along with related characters like the military leader, is familiar from the personas of male animal trainers; circus men could embody the hyper-masculine hero.

Women in novels, unlike girls, actually did join the circus. A lot of the time, however, they followed stereotypically "feminine" reasoning in their doing so (e.g., romance), and the theme of a "normal" woman running off to be with a circus performer was a popular one. *The Lost Girl* by D. H. Lawrence, for instance, features a woman in her late twenties who was nearly resigned to a life of "old-maiddom" filled with dull work, until one day she meets a traveling Italian performer whose exotic air and appearance entice her to ultimately marry and move away with him. Novels sometimes, though, used this theme of romance and flipped it to criticize the way women were restrained by their husbands and, by extension, patriarchal society as a whole. One woman in an 1897 novel does not hate her marriage, but she simply can not be "subject to the wishes and whims of one man, bound like a slave . . . [she] found the chains galling." She leaves her husband and joins a much more exhilarating circus life, and, after a series of dramatic events, finally gets back together with him much later when he instead gets a circus job himself and joins *her* new life.[89]

These novels also contained some of the elements of risk that men's fiction did. While men's risk-taking was much more direct in their wrestling of wild beasts, women's relationships with said riskiness and independence came in a different variety. In addition to performing acts just as dangerous as men, novelists knew that women were also risking their social standing and reputation by choosing a profession that many looked down upon. In *Her Elephant Man: A Story*

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[88] Adams and Keene, 43-44.
[89] Ibid., 44, 50.

of the Sawdust Ring (1919) by Pearl Doles Bell, one of the main characters, Joan, acknowledges the double standard when she tells her love interest that "it's a different thing being a woman in the circus and being a man. . . . the world don't call the men the names they have for the women."[90]

On the other hand, the circus could also be portrayed as *less* risky for women than regular society was. Here, the circus is a world of its own—one where "women can exist outside of social pressures and restrictive views of normality and can be judged by their character and their skills." Often, women would find a "freeing, romantic space" to which they could escape from regular society, a place where they could forge their own paths and find "meaningful work for which they are respected and well compensated." Also in *Her Elephant Man*, Bell portrays the inside of the circus as better, free from the strict social standards and conservative moral judgment of society. Professionally, Joan is able to "leap through a hoop into womanhood" and become a successful career equestrienne, earning independence where the average woman could usually not.[91]

In short, numerous circus novels presented themes of women finding freedom under the big top away from the constraints and limitations of "proper" society. Strict societal codes about how women were meant to act and who they were meant to be faded away; "purposeful performers within a tent are superior to pompous drones within a drawing room," say Adams and Keene.[92] These books could, then, convey a romanticized notion of circus life not unlike media we still see today, but it was not at all entirely untrue. And these two attitudes about circus careers for women—that they were both harmful to their reputations and liberating for them as individuals—are quite accurate to real life (though the bad reputations did, as discussed, change with time).[93]

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[90] Quoted in ibid., 45-46.
[91] Ibid., 44-46.
[92] Ibid., 51.
[93] For more about how circus women took pride in their work and gained success as individuals on their own terms, see Adams and Keene, 92, as well as personal accounts like Tiny Kline's memoir.

In summary, the way that the majority of women in the circus were presented in advertisements like posters, in the press, and in fiction—and therefore often viewed by the public—was twofold. On one hand, they were shown to be elegant and hardworking in their athletic abilities as well as domestic and morally virtuous in character. But just below the surface, the appeal of and demand for these paragons of moral and physical discipline were propelled forward in large part by an undercurrent of aesthetic and sexual desirability. In the following two chapters, this duality in performers' bodies being inherently aberrant yet providing some sort of benefit (even beyond entertainment) to those who gazed upon them will be expanded and taken to the extreme in a society inclined to create a distinct "other" in those who did not just choose to be, but were born, different from most Americans.

Chapter 3

Exotic Education: Portraying Race in the Circus

The presentation of white women as something to admire and potentially learn from, as well as a sort of object of "otherness" to consume with interest, was amplified for those who were already seen as distinctly "other" in society. The portrayal of people of color—whether American- or foreign-born—was double-edged; their intrigue was in their "exoticism," their acts frequently framed as an educational learning experience for spectators while largely serving as something to be shamelessly leered at with morbid fascination. Their individuality was obscured as they played a nameless part of a collective, they were sexualized and made to seem "savage," and, when their own images were not being twisted, their presence was insultingly fabricated by dressing up white performers as non-white races. Exceptions to this pattern were present but highly scarce, and the representation of people of color in the circus was generally dehumanizing and exploitative.

Performers of color usually had their unique identities hidden and were only presented as a stereotype of a whole. When they were presented on their own, they were rarely identified by name, and were usually presented as a representative of their collective racial or ethnic demographic rather than their own act. White performers were frequently featured for their skill as star solo acts or in small/family groups, and in "specs." Unless they also possessed some physical rarity, though, performers of color were mostly advertised as nameless or even as indistinguishable from the collective as their own unique act. Specs, short for spectacles, were the grand opening acts featuring most or all members of the cast that depicted a certain themed scene

as a sort of condensed play. Spec performers numbered in the hundreds or sometimes over a thousand, and they dressed in elaborate costumes. Scenes usually focused on popular fictional tales and historical events, and they were patriotic and/or exotic in tone. Specs remained a circus feature from Barnum's time in the 1880s-1890s through the 1930s and even a bit into the 1940s. Unsurprisingly, these specs tended to ignore or sensationalize the complicated aspects of historical events in favor of grandiose visual splendor (like Columbus's "discovery" of America), and this also applied to their depictions of foreign cultures and people.[94]

Specs featured massive, almost farcical displays of peoples from Asia, the Middle East, Africa, and the pre-Columbian Americas for sheer grandiosity, using these cultures as exotic decoration, taking them as their own and remaking them to suit their purposes while also exploiting the bodies of the performers. With such a large number of diverse people to be portrayed, circuses, like other types of shows, would simply outfit the cast that they had in various ethnic costumes to play dress up instead of hiring workers actually representative of those groups.[95] Sparse clothing and the portrayal of people of ethnicities to which one did not belong were not just reserved for women and white performers, respectively, either; the media, too, "were obsessed with the scantily clad, nonwhite male body as a model of sensual, premodern masculinity."[96] Circuses frequently put usually non-performing workers in costume to increase cast numbers in specs and make them more impressive, and proprietors often "fetishized" Black American men by putting them in scenes of Africa and Asia. These men "strode around the big top dressed in robes and headpieces. During

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[94] Posey, "The American Circus Spectacle," 310-320. Some circuses claimed to have up to 1,250 people in their specs, but this might have been inflated. As for how long specs were around, I determined this by simply keyword searching for spec posters on the Ringling Museum's online collections database and sorted by date, and some posters for specs still appear into the 1940s.

[95] Circuses were notorious for fraud; costuming white people as other races would have been a given. Though chapter four will only focus on authentic atypical bodies, sideshows further took fraud to the extreme at times in outright faking parts of their performers' bodies. See for example: James W. Cook, *The Arts of Deception: Playing with Fraud in the Age of Barnum* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001).

[96] Davis, *The Circus Age*, 185.

the course of the spec, [they] went to a separate tent several times, where they gradually took off pieces of their costuming until at the end of the spec, their bodies were nearly bare."[97]

Of course, it was not just African-American men who portrayed ethnic identities that were not their own; it *was* mostly white women. Looking at actual photographs, we can easily see that many white performers are shown in foreign ethnic dress for their performances, including blackface.[98] Rising stars were not exempt from this either; Tiny Kline and Dorothy Herbert, for example, have both been photographed in Native American costuming.[99] Some posters drew the characters in racial specs as being of the race of their region, while others drew them with light skin regardless. Specs were mostly comprised of "ballet girls," a role that was an easy way in to the circus and required little training or skill. Some seasons, circuses would hire over a thousand ballet girls. These white women portrayed people of other races and wore "heavy eyeliner, lipstick, a dark wig, and filmy, pseudo-oriental costumes, all to render her a more 'authentic' Other." And despite actual women from some of these countries dressing very conservatively in their normal lives, circus "owners consciously chose to costume the ballet girl in skimpy dress." Specs featuring "Oriental" displays, for example, "especially" made use of "groups of scantily-clad women"; scholar Paul Stirton gives the example of the Barnum & Bailey 1903 poster for the "Spectacle of Balkis" (Queen of Sheba), citing it as "one of the more explicit of these" instances. It depicts a large group of women wearing dresses with low necklines and skirts with open/slit sides, and many more posters follow this pattern. Davis further elaborates on another Queen of Sheba-themed spec, saying that two Ringling brothers "recognized that the spec would be more culturally authentic if

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[97] Posey, 312; Davis, *The Circus Age*, 188.

[98] Edward J. Kelty, "Sparks Circus," June 5, 1929, photograph, the Ringling Museum, Sarasota, ht0004659, online; "Sig Sautelle: Performers," 1898, photograph, the Ringling Museum, Sarasota, ht0005325, online.

[99] Kline, 9; H.A. Atwell, "Dorothy Herbert posing with Orangatang [sic]," 1936, photograph, Online Collections Database, Circus World Museum, Baraboo, WI, CWi 492.

the ballet dresses were floor-length, but they nevertheless agreed to shorten the dresses to the knee, because, according to Al [Ringling], doing so would 'make the ballet look better.'" This practice did not actually "undermine [the circus's] claims to highlight respectable womanhood" as one might suspect, though, since "as a disguised character, the ballet girl complemented the racist writings of contemporary European and American theorists and novelists."[100]

This race impersonation also occurred with individual acts. Several snake charmers, for instance, were billed as "Hindoo" but were not. Newspapers and circuses themselves often "freely admitted that this seemingly mysterious foreigner was a 'home-grown' Euroamerican woman" in aims of "drawing audiences to the sideshow tent . . . the racial disguise became a racial tease, the woman's 'real' identity being openly masked as she slipped into the meager garb of the fictitious Other." Though these women wore "thick eye liner, lipstick, [and] filmy, diaphanous clothing," their "skin remained pale" during their act.[101] Additionally, specs that did focus on foreign ethnic groups (even if they did have some accurate casting) also sometimes had a canonically white "conqueror" type figure as the central character.[102] The following quote from Barnum & Bailey's circus in describing their *Grand Tournament*—a temporarily scaled-down version of the previously larger spec—sums the idea up aptly: the tournament was meant to present "every known human and animal accompaniment in vogue."[103] The people depicted in specs were simply representative samplings of whatever "exotic" culture was fashionable or trendy at the moment.

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[100] Stirton, 126; Davis, *The Circus Age*, 111-112.
[101] Davis, *The Circus Age*, 123-124.
[102] Posey, 323. For another example beyond the Columbus spec, see: "Fabulous Pageant of Oriental Magnificence: 'Nepal,'" Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey, ca. 1938, poster, Strobridge Lithographing Company, the Jay T. Last Collection of Graphic Arts and Social History, Huntington Digital Library, 385985.
[103] Posey, 319-320.

As stated above, performers of color were infrequently identified by name as individuals, or even with a surname for family groups. When they were named, it was at a much lower number than with white performers. To glean a quick survey of this pattern aside from specs, I simply searched for "Barnum & Bailey Poster" in the Ringling Museum's online collections; sorted by "Relevance"; further filtered by "Classification/Category: Posters"; checked the box to display only results that had an "Image Available"; and went through the first approximately five hundred results. Of these, there were a significant number of large group scenes depicted to convey the circus's grandeur, as well as some primarily depicting the proprietor's faces and circus animals. There were also numerous posters depicting smaller (often family) groups of white performers, often named in the posters like "the Four Sisters Deike," "The Meers Sisters, Marie and Ouika," "The World-Famous Silbons" acrobats, etc.[104] There were also many posters of solo acts that specifically named the performer as we saw in the last chapter; every single one of those women listed was white. There were also, to be sure, groups of white performers pictured without being identified by name. Some of them were actual established acts, like "a famous family of European experts," and others either were actual specific acts or were possibly just a general depiction of a type of act that could be seen at the circus.[105]

What I did not see in this particular sampling, though, were non-white performers identified by name. I did find two separate depictions of lone Native American men in feathered headdresses, though they were not named or performing, only posed still as representing what might be found at that circus. There was also one of three unnamed troupes of Chinese acrobats, suspended by

[104] "The Four Sisters Deike," Barnum & Bailey, 1909, poster, Strobridge Lithographing Company, the Ringling Museum, Sarasota, ht2000293, online; "The Meers Sisters, Equestriennes," Barnum & Bailey, 1895, poster, Strobridge Lithographing Company, the Ringling Museum, Sarasota, ht2000164, online; "World Famous Silbons."
[105] "Bicycles and Unicycles," 1889; "Thrilling Aerial Feats By Female Wonders," Barnum & Bailey, 1889, poster, Strobridge Lithographing Company, the Ringling Museum, Sarasota, ht2000004, online.

their hair while stereotypically drinking tea and eating rice, or contorting their bodies and spinning plates. Another was impersonally titled "Rangoon and Singhala" people—likely incorrect or alternate spellings of areas in present-day Myanmar and Sri Lanka, respectively—walking across various sharp blades. There was one poster (appearing twice, once in French and once in German, while most of the other posters were in English) of a solo Japanese tightrope-walker performing a slide for life act with "*une célérité étonnante et une précision d'un judgement*"—"amazing celerity [speed] and startling accuracy of judgement"—and "*sang froid extraordinaires*," something that seems like quite the stupendous sight to see, yet he, too, remained unnamed.[106]

Outside of this sampling, other posters depicting groups of foreigners (in which they were at least identified in the collective, as opposed to specs) include scenes of people from various tribes and colonies as will be further addressed just a bit later when talking about the inclusion of exotic animals; just one example of this is an "East India Exhibition" complete with "100 Natives" from a "Hindoo Colony in All its Native Splendor," some performing various occupations and all drawn as though posed for a group photograph. Circuses also advertised generically unidentified groups of Native and Black Americans, furthering the separation not just between America and the world but between white America and marginalized people of color at home. "Wild & Weird Indian Scenes showing the strange customs among the various tribes of North American Indians" were presented as part of the Wild West Exhibition of Forepaugh's "New and Greatest All-Feature Show," for example, with a group of Native Americans shown on a poster doing "The Omaha Feather Dance" alongside images of tepees and horses. A herald for another show's "Great Indian

[106] "By the Hair of Their Heads," Barnum & Bailey, 1916, poster, Strobridge Lithographing Company, the Ringling Museum, Sarasota, ht2000361, online; "Rangoon and Singhala," Barnum & Bailey, 1889, poster, Strobridge Lithographing Company, the Ringling Museum, Sarasota, ht2000001, online; "Glissade Perilleuse Execute Avec Une Celerite," Barnum & Bailey, 1898, poster, Strobridge Lithographing Company, the Ringling Museum, Sarasota, ht2000209, online; "Breath-Taking Japanese Slide for Life," Barnum & Bailey, 1898, poster, Library of Congress, 2002695271, online.

Exhibition" announces excitedly in very large, bold font, that there will be "**NATIVE INDIANS!**" and a "**GRAND SCALPING SCENE!**"[107] Another circus poster depicts "Clarke's Slave Cabin Jubilee Singers, Shouters and Juba-Patters" performing "plaintive pathetic renditions of plantation melodies." Shows like these were notably featured when American circuses toured in Europe, such as a troupe of Native American performers as part of a U.S. circus in Liverpool in 1857 as well as the infamous blackface minstrel shows that even the circus was not exempt from showing.[108]

There are a few exceptions to this pattern. The only non-white act that I located in the above search that named the person was Ludger Sylbaris, a Black man who was "The Only Living Object That Survived in The 'Silent City of Death' . . . Volcanic Eruption." He is not shown performing any amazing feat, however, and is only depicted standing still with shoulders slouched on the left side of the poster and as being pulled from the disaster's wreckage, limp, on the right. While this breaks the trend a bit, he is not exactly shown as a *performer*, more so as a spectacle—"Object"—in the same vein that people as physical "curiosities" were. Searching more broadly outside of this sample, some amount of advertising for performers of color by name (again, exclusively as an ethnographic display) did exist in the United States, one example being the Black elephant trainer Ephraim "Eph" Thompson. An 1886 lithograph depicts his act as "The Greatest Wonder In The World," though even the poster itself is elusive to track down. Another example is that of Bombayo, "the Man from India" who performed "the most astounding midair somersaulting

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[107] "Carl Hagenbeck's East India Exposition," ca. 1906, poster, Courier Litho. Co. (Buffalo), Library of Congress, 2019634235, online; "Adam Forepaugh Circus," 1889, poster, Central Litho & Eng., Online Collections Database, Circus World Museum, Baraboo, WI, CWi 14073; "Washburn's Show," 1868, herald, Troy Whig Steam Printing Establishment, Online Collections Database, Circus World Museum, Baraboo, WI, CWi 6786.

[108] Kory W. Rogers, "Shelburne Museum's Colchester Posters and Circus Advertising," in *The American Circus*, eds. Susan Weber, Kenneth Ames, and Matthew Wittmann (New Haven: Yale University Press, for the Bard Graduate Center, New York, 2012) 139, 144. I can not tell for sure if this is meant to depict actual Black performers or people in blackface. Brenda Assael, "The American Circus in Victorian Britain," in *The American Circus*, eds. Susan Weber, Kenneth Ames, and Matthew Wittmann (New Haven: Yale University Press, for the Bard Graduate Center, New York, 2012), 66-68. This specific minstrel example is from before the golden age, in the 1840s.

exploits ever witnessed" in the Hagenbeck-Wallace Circus. He is cleverly drawn in midair above a stretched rope with his upside-down body covering up the letters "RC" in "circus," which adds the appearance of even more height to his jump—he is so skilled in these somersaults that he can not even fit properly on the poster. I will note, though, that, while his act was due to his skill, his being Indian was still mentioned, presumably to add that air of exoticism. Furthering this point, Bombayo is also listed in a 1932 local paper as one of many acts in the upcoming circus show, the only information about him being "Bombayo, the man from India"; the newspaper immediately goes on to list other acts by white performers, such as "Tamara, golden-haired Russian aerial star and the darling of Europe" and "the Cannestrellis, unsupported ladder marvels." Both of these European acts had their actual skills mentioned; Bombayo, only his nationality.[109] Even then, on posters or in newspapers, his name was only given as a stage name that was undoubtedly meant to sound exotic to an American audience.[110]

It was not uncommon for newspapers, however, to cite non-white performers by name. While the aforementioned Barnum & Bailey poster neglected to name their Japanese tightrope walker, the *Chicago Tribune* wrote about a Japanese tightrope walker by name, "King Sarbro," when recounting a performance accident. Another paper made mention of the Suigomoto family of Japanese acrobats along with their listing of several European circus families.[111] In summary,

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[109] "Ludger Sylbaris," Barnum & Bailey, 1903, poster, Strobridge Lithographing Company, the Ringling Museum, Sarasota, ht2000262, online; "Greatest Wonder in the World, Mr. Eph. Thompson," 1886, poster, reproduced in Jeffrey Green, "140 : 'EPH' THOMPSON THE ELEPHANT TRAINER, 1859-1909," courtesy of Rainer Lotz, https://jeffreygreen.co.uk/140-eph-thompson-the-elephant-trainer-1859-1909/; "Hagenback-Wallace Circus," 1934, poster, Erie Litho Co., online Collections Database, Circus World Museum, Baraboo, WI, CWi 17330; "Circus Trains Arrive Today," *Patriot* (Harrisburg), June 3, 1932, America's Historical Newspapers (Readex).

[110] Bombayo's real name was N. P. Kannan. He was trained by his uncle, Keeleri Kunhikannan (who was dubbed "the father of Indian circus") in the state of Kerala in India. Mumbai (Bombay) is hundreds of miles away from Kerala. Since "Bombayo" was not from Bombay, this further implies that his stage name was chosen solely to emphasize his nationality and sound foreign but recognizable to Americans. Nisha P. R., "The Circus Man Who Knew Too Much," *Economic & Political Weekly* 52.34 (Aug. 26, 2017): 18.

[111] "King Sarbro," *Chicago Tribune*, Mar. 25, 1874, Newspapers.com; "Famous Performers Are with the Greater Norris & Rowe Circus," *Morning Oregonian* (Portland), May 10, 1908, America's Historical Newspapers (Readex).

then, there were a number of instances of non-white circus stars being promoted solely for the merits of their skills as white performers were, but as a general pattern, it occurred far less than with white performers and compared to group depictions.

Performers of color in the vast majority of posters, however, were not depicted kindly. As stated, many posters used a small group of performers of diverse nationalities, ethnicities, and races and extrapolated them to represent an entire demographic, a sort of sample that the circus had collected and was using to teach the public. This was, to some extent, analogous to the circus's portrayal of exotic animals, in that "circuses enhanced their authority as sources of up-to-date information about U.S. expansionism with displays of animals from the American empire."[112] With all foreign living beings, animal or human, the white colonialist would essentially set out to foreign lands, conquer and maraud them, and bring back their findings to exhibit to the American public so as to "educate" them about the places the Western world had the right and duty to civilize.

This line of thought is made evident in animal trainer acts. Popular acts frequently starred heroic white men dressed in military- or safari-hunter-style costumes that propagated and perpetuated the idea of man's conquest over nature, these trainers "underscore[ing] beliefs about nature" which "reflected the prevailing belief system in culture whereby wild animals were regarded as embodying nature, which was available to be exploited and improved." The outfits conveyed a sense of authority through the lens of masculine bravery and self-control, the trainer having "triumph[ed] over human instincts to flee and ultimately the fear of death" and presenting himself as a "disinterested man of science." Importantly, these costumes enforced themes of colonialism and "geological conquest," as "the acquisition and exploitation of exotic animals followed the nineteenth-century expansion of colonial empires" and "imperial conquest."[113]

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[112] Davis, "The Circus Americanized," 46.
[113] Tait, "Performed Identities as Circus Illusions," 279-283.

Animal trainers were a key part of the circus throughout its history, but one example from even before the golden age is that of lion tamer Van Amburgh who performed in America as well as Europe during the 1830s and 1840s; his "mastery over wild animals," explains historian Brett Mizelle, "served to naturalize the dominance of Euro-Americans over nature." One lithograph from this period (1838) even depicts Van Amburgh standing with one leg up on top of the back of a lion; he might as well have planted a flag there. Peta Tait concludes her essay on performative circus identity of animal trainers by stating that costumes such as these "contributed to ideas of human separateness from animals," and that "the performance identity of the male trainer in animal acts contributed to cultural belief in the hierarchical dominance of the human species throughout modernism."[114] I would argue this even further and say that the image of the almost-exclusively-white animal trainer not only symbolized the conquering of nature's animals in the colonies and "uncivilized" world, but stood in stark juxtaposition of, and superiority to, the non-white people from these places as well.

Living beings from around the world were showcased in tents separate from the main show, such as the famous "ethnological congress," a popular feature that displayed foreign people right alongside exotic animals in the menagerie tent. The roots of this feature can be traced to 1874 when a German zoo owner "first incorporated 'natives' into his foreign animal display," and a version of Barnum's show debuted its first ethnological congress in 1886 after Bailey had ordered two agents from the United States to travel the world and "collect human specimens for future productions." This became an integral feature of the Barnum & Bailey circus in the 1890s when, in 1894, its proprietors "expanded their ethnological displays of people of color." At this point, "Barnum & Bailey's new ethnological congress included entire families, echoing the Midway

[114] Ibid., 265-268, 290.

Plaisance at the World's Columbian Exhibition in Chicago in 1893. Barnum & Bailey's 1894 route book describes the 'family style' ethnological congress as a sort of intellectual fast food allowing whole cultures to be 'eaten' at a glance." The height of the congress seems to have been the 1890s, but it was around in some capacity up until the 1920s at which point it finally disappeared.[115]

Billed as "GREAT" or "GRAND" or some other grandiose adjective, the ethnological congress exhibited samplings of people from all around the world staged in their "natural habitat." They were decked in what was (or what was meant to be) traditional dress, and they performed acts like dancing and playing musical instruments—all things stated to be aspects of their everyday, "typical home life." In Barnum & Bailey posters from the 1890s, animals line the perimeter of the massive tent, while people perform on raised platforms running down the center. They, too, dance, play instruments, or sit or stand holding weapons. The forefront of the platform in one poster is labeled "STRANGE AND SAVAGE TRIBES," a living museum of the foreign.[116]

A newspaper from 1880 describes another scene from W. C. Coup's circus, much smaller but similar in structure to Barnum's ethnological congress. The "Palace of Wonders" was a tent containing "two natives of Borneo, whose elfish faces and attenuated frames sufficiently attest their exotic origin and attract the *scientist and juvenile alike*" (emphasis added); one would be hard-pressed to find a much more direct statement of the circus's double feature as a subject of study and education for the (white) American in addition to innocent entertainment.[117] One Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Combined Circus poster, instead of being packed full of text

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[115] Davis, *The Circus Age*, 118-119, 131, 228.
[116] "Great Ethnological Congress," Barnum & Bailey, 1895, poster, Strobridge Lithographing Company, the Ringling Museum, Sarasota, ht2000158, online; "Strange and Savage Tribes," Barnum & Bailey, 1894, poster, Strobridge Lithographing Company, the Ringling Museum, Sarasota, ht2000156, online; "Grand Ethnological Congress," Barnum & Bailey, 1894, poster, Strobridge Lithographing Company, the Ringling Museum, Sarasota, ht2000155, online; "A Glance at the Great Ethnological Congress," Barnum & Bailey, 1895, poster, Strobridge Lithographing Company, the Ringling Museum, Sarasota, ht2000159, online.
[117] "Coup's Circus," *Daily Inter Ocean* (Chicago), May 12, 1880, America's Historical Newspapers (Readex).

attesting to the circus's wonders like many other posters were, used no text besides their show name and slogan and instead let the drawing speak for itself: a scene of Africa, vegetation in the background, bright sun hitting the figures of five giraffes and one elephant in the foreground who form a sort of arch over a row of costumed, painted, weapon-wielding people. The people, like the giraffes, stand in a line that angles backward until the end of it is out of sight, more tips of spears visible than tops of heads. The line of people fades and finally disappears behind a giraffe's leg into the hazy yellow heat of the jungle.[118] Posters of white performers with wild animals favor depictions of them overcoming and dominating the exotic, sometimes dressed-up creatures with training;[119] this poster here has the people and animals simply standing there, in their "wild" state, blending together as one. Every set of eyes in this poster gazes into the viewer's.

Women of color were presented particularly differently. While the circus was very progressive in many ways, the racial differences in presentation of bodies largely mirrored that of general American society; while white women were, by the golden age, framed as beautiful and domestic if a bit scandalous, women of color were presented as wild and strange, as "fierce, immodest, mannish, or animal-human hybrids."[120] "Racial 'color,'" explains Janet M. Davis, "defined the degree of nudity that was deemed appropriate for display." "World's fair organizers, the publishers of *National Geographic* (1888), and circus impresarios alike" used the bodies of women of color to make "educational claims." For example, in 1896, *National Geographic* "first

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[118] "Animals," Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey, n.d., poster, Erie Lithograph, the Ringling Museum, Sarasota, ht2001532, online.
[119] "The Fearless Mabel Stark"; "Lion Tamer," Walter L. Main, n.d., poster, Erie Lithograph, the Ringling Museum, Sarasota, ht2002568, online; "Terrell Jacobs the Lion King," Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey, n.d., poster, Erie Lithograph, the Ringling Museum, Sarasota, ht2001613, online; "Lion and Elephant Act," Al G. Barnes Circus, n.d., poster, Erie Lithograph, the Ringling Museum, Sarasota, ht2001075, online.
[120] Davis, "The Circus Americanized,"44.

published photographs of bare-breasted [B]lack women. Euroamericans easily accepted such photographs of women of color as edifying, while topless white women were found only at seedy carnival cooch shows and nascent strip joints—not on the pages of a decent magazine or big 'Sunday School' circus." In comparison, "*National Geographic* first photographed topless white women in the 1980s—and then only from behind."[121] In short, "dark skin and a lack of clothing, even exposed breasts, characterized the 'lady savage,' available for extended perusal since the audience was seemingly attending a scientific demonstration. . . . Such displays were of course erotic as well as instructional."[122]

Since most circus people of color, especially women, were only presented as a novelty due to their race, this novelty was multiplied if they also had some sort of highly unusual physical characteristic.[123] As mentioned above, Black women were frequently depicted nude in a way that white women were not, but "by the early 1930s, in an age of movies, radio, and increased magazine readership, the spectacle of seminude women of color from around the world engaged in 'typical' activities had lost its novelty at the circus. To meet their audience's demand for newness," circuses incorporated foreign women with "ritualistically disfigured" modified bodies. To illustrate the case, we can look at some of the most popular of these acts of Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey, one of which they called the "Ubangi Savages." This act consisted of eight Congolese women dressed in skimpy clothing showing off the large wooden disks that they placed in their lips which caused them to stretch sometimes more than nine inches. The "Tribe of *Genuine* Ubangi Savages" (emphasis added)—ironically named by a Ringling Bros. press agent after a place in Africa hundreds of miles away from where the women were actually from just because it sounded

[121] Davis, *The Circus Age*, 92-93.
[122] Adams and Keene, 144.
[123] Davis, "The Circus Americanized" 44.

more exotic (not unlike Bombayo)—were "frequently juxtaposed with 'dainty' [white] circus women and occasionally topless" and were "marketed as the antithesis of 'womanly' beauty, their nudity a signifier of racial inferiority." In some of their posters, they were drawn entirely topless, their nude bodies right next to text that said, "Greatest Educational Feature of All Time!" If that was not quite enough, they were also *literally* compared to animals, described on their posters as a tribe "NEW TO CIVILIZATION!!! From Africa's Darkest Depths!" who had "mouths and lips as large as those of full-grown crocodiles." Recalling that the ethnological congress had died out by the previous decade, the Ubangi were instead a feature of the sideshow, and also briefly walked around in the main show with their husbands.[124]

Another popular group who fit this category were the "Giraffe-Neck Women of Burma." These women were also featured in the 1930s, and a poster similarly advertised that at least one of them would appear in the main show. These women practiced body modification in the form of adding brass rings to their necks to eventually give the appearance of an incredibly long, stretched neck. Instead of partial or total nudity as a sign of savageness, these women were said by showmen to have "performed physical labor in Burma, a characteristic that defined them as 'savages.'" On their posters, these women were called "THE GREATEST EDUCATIONAL DISCOVERY OF THE CENTURY" and a part of the "The Greatest Educational Attraction The World Has Ever Known!" (it appears that many acts were the *greatest* in the Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus). While Davis asserts that the Ubangi women were marketed as the "antithesis" of feminine beauty, Adams and Keene maintain that the Giraffe-Neck Women, with their "exaggerated beauty . . . their china-doll features, their striking earrings, their carefully coiled and pinned hair that resembled the bobbed hairdo of a flapper" are presented as "contrasts of beauty and frightfulness,

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[124] "Tribe of Genuine Ubangi Savages," Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey, 1930, poster, Illinois Lithograph, the Ringling Museum, Sarasota, ht2001645, online; Davis, *The Circus Age*, 134-136.

freaks in their abnormality but also in their self-possession and eerie beauty." "Dark foreigners," then, "drew crowds when they were not just dark but disfigured. . . . they represented the worst of what the world had to offer, well beyond the securities of middle-class America." Though the ethnological congress of the turn of the century had faded out, one of these posters did refer to the Giraffe-Neck Women as part of a "stupendous *new* congress of amazing world-wide features," (emphasis added) perhaps as a sideshow feature.[125]

Just as femininity was deeply interwoven with race, so too was race with physical "abnormality." I have placed the Ubangi and Giraffe-Neck Women in this section due to the unusualness of their bodies being artificial and culturally elective, whereas the next chapter will focus on performers with naturally atypical bodies. These two groups show, though, that the racial themes of the ethnological congress were very similar to those of women of color in the sideshow who occupied "unusual" bodies. Historian Nadja Durbach contends that "scholars have often argued that the freak show and the ethnographic exhibit represent two different traditions of human display, and thus have treated them separately," but the two are closely intertwined; the "boundary between the freak and the ethnographic display was always porous."[126] The Ubangi and Giraffe-Neck Women provide a couple examples of this intersection of race and "strange" bodies, and there are plenty more instances of this in the freak show. Performers with unique bodies—both people of color and white performers, women and men—were the main attraction at the sideshow.

[125] "Giraffe-Neck Women From Burma," Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey, 1933, poster, Central Print & Illinois Litho., the Ringling Museum, Sarasota, ht2001730, online; "Giraffe-Neck Women From Burma," Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey, n.d., poster, Central Print & Illinois Litho., the Ringling Museum, Sarasota, ht2001666, online; Davis, *The Circus Age*, 136-137; Adams and Keene, 102, 144.
[126] Nadja Durbach, "Circuses, Sideshows and Freaks: Deformity, Spectacle, and Victorian Culture," in *Victorian Popular Culture* (Adam Matthew Digital), 2009.

Chapter 4

Freak Show: Exhibiting Disability and Atypical Bodies in the Sideshow

Performers with atypical bodies,[127] like those of color, were met with both wonder and disdain. Atypically bodied people of any race, though, were presented individually; the entire draw of sideshow performers' acts was in their difference from most people, so rather than obscure their identities, circuses exaggerated them to create sensationalized personas. Gender conventions led circuses to frame most atypically bodied women as proper ladies. Importance of race, though, could vary significantly; some performers of color appeared much like their white counterparts, some had their race emphasized in a sometimes degrading manner, and some experienced both. Respect and basic humanity afforded in portrayals also depended on the nature of a performer's atypicality. Regardless of race, most atypically bodied performers were staged as respectable high society people, whereas those with particular conditions were assigned foreign or even savage status. This all resulted in an exhibiting of atypical bodies that aimed to inspire in audiences, through individual performers and across the sideshow cast altogether, both aversion and awe.

[127] I have chosen to use the phrase "atypical bodies" and variants throughout this chapter when describing freak show performers in order to encompass within one term everyone with an apparent and uncommon medical condition. This term, therefore, includes those with disabilities, disorders, diseases, and deformities that manifested physically, as distinguished from mental or otherwise invisible as well as physical but common conditions. I use this phrasing because I have yet to find any consensus in the literature for a term that truly and accurately describes the distinguishing characteristics of these performers as people; "freak" refers to their occupation and onstage persona, not an inherent part of who they were. Further, terms such as "freak" also include "typically bodied" people of color exhibited in the sideshow as "ethnographic" displays, trained novelty acts, and frauds, all of which are not the subject of this chapter. To use "disabled" here is too narrow and to use "sideshow performer" is too broad for who exactly is being described. That being stated, I do still use the terms "disabled," "freak," and "sideshow performer" at some points throughout this paper where applicable ("freak" regarding performed identity) and/or additional specifications are used ("these sideshow performers"). For more exploration of this convoluted terminology and what constituted a "freak," see Robert Bogdan, *Freak Show: Presenting Human Oddities for Amusement and Profit* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 3-10. In this, he states: "being a freak is not a personal matter, a physical condition that some people have. The onstage freak is something else off stage. 'Freak' is a state of mind, a frame of practices, a way of thinking about and presenting people. It is the enactment of tradition, the performance of a stylized presentation."

The fascination with bodies perceived as strange and unusual is not a recent phenomenon. In the United States, museums displayed various curiosities like artifacts, mechanical devices, animals (live and stuffed), and "human oddities" (atypically bodied and "exotic" non-white people) as early as the eighteenth century. These museums, like the circus as a whole, were marketed as educational and therefore excused people's real desire for entertainment. They sometimes toured on their own, but in 1837, a museum was first advertised as traveling with a circus. Museums and freak shows then began regularly traveling with circuses, though most were still independently owned. Freak shows gained massive popularity when P. T. Barnum established his American Museum in New York City, which ran from 1841-1868 and housed an assorted collection of freaks advertised with banners outside. When his circus was established in 1871 and taken on the railroad a year later, its proprietors took part of the museum's display of "freaks" along with it. By around 1880, most circuses included freak shows that they now owned. Freaks and variety acts were put together in their own separate tent, becoming the freak show feature now synonymous with the term "sideshow" as a whole. The freak/sideshow would remain a "standard circus fixture" throughout the golden age until its eventual decline in the 1950s.[128]

[128] Circuses sometimes had multiple sideshows, the freak show being one of them. Since the two terms often are (and were) used interchangeably, I similarly use them interchangeably in this paper. (Another type of *side* show was the "cooch show," which featured women who danced seductively in skimpy costumes and were sometimes racially disguised.) Further, while the ethnological congress was also a separate feature from the main show that was housed within the menagerie tent, the word "sideshow" in this chapter is used only to refer to the freak show. For presentation of performers of color who were typically bodied and shown as ethnographic displays within the freak show, the contents of the last chapter similarly apply. See p. 55. Bogdan, *Freak Show*, 3-6, 29-32, 40-47; Davis, *The Circus Age*, 20, 118, 127, 228.

The field of disability studies has brought new attention to the sideshow in recent years, and the topic is a complex one of continual study.[129] Many performers were lured or forced into circus life; others possessed great agency and chose to exhibit themselves as a way to make money in a world where their bodies would otherwise prevent them from getting work to support themselves.[130] Sideshows especially took advantage of people's desire for novel entertainment, as well as their anxieties about otherness, to create their narrative of the freak. In terms of publicity, the scholarly focus is often on the actual environment of the freak show (what pamphlets said and showmen would shout), newspaper reports, and promotional photographs. What is not as frequently discussed, though, are circus posters depicting freak acts. This does make sense, as there were not many sideshow posters actually made to begin with.[131] A handful were made and preserved, though, and these can be analyzed along with other visual media such as banners, photographs (many printed on postcards), and herald and broadside illustrations.

Posters and other drawn media are an especially interesting resource, as they have the capacity to represent their subjects as audiences should expect, more or less. But they can also exaggerate. Text alone could tell people how to picture an act; photographs could present how they literally looked; drawings could combine both, and audiences could envision what they were about to see but not distinguish how much of that they should expect to have been embellished. Posters advertising the main show, for instance, usually depicted performers in motion, including large groups; a trapeze artist drawn close-up and smiling directly at the viewer while bending her body

[129] See for example: Bogdan, *Freak Show*; Cook, *Arts of Deception*; Michael M. Chemers, *Staging Stigma: A Critical Examination of the American Freak Show* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008); Rachel Adams, *Sideshow U.S.A: Freaks and the American Cultural Imagination* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001); Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), chap. 3.
[130] Davis, *The Circus Age*, 26-27, 198; "Kidnapped, Then Forced Into The Sideshow: The True Story Of The Muse Brothers," Author Interviews, *NPR*, Heard on *Fresh Air*, Oct, 18, 2016, online.
[131] Bogdan, 46; Durbach, "Circuses, Sideshows and Freaks."

and flying through the air, a cat trainer standing underneath a dozen tigers leaping in perfect coordination, and a troupe of thousands all drawn perfectly in sync with no one's face obscured and nothing out of place was simply more exciting than someone sitting still. In addition, the elaborate costuming and bright colors of individual performers (and especially of the spec) were important features that would not have come across looking nearly as dazzling in black-and-white.

Photographs could still exaggerate to a certain extent, though, and the sideshow took advantage of this. The way that photographs were staged and framed could create a sort of optical illusion that enhanced a specific trait and influenced audience perception. This careful setup was especially effective for performers of opposite extremes, like height, and giants and dwarfs would sometimes be paired together to emphasize their contrast. Photographers would use oversized or miniature versions of household items to distort scale reference, leave a significant amount of blank space above short subjects' heads, and nearly cut the tops off of tall subjects' heads. Even with photographs, the freak's body was not "necessarily, inherently aberrant," but was instead "constructed as freakish through the use of staging and framing and in collaboration with the audience itself," or at least furthered with these tactics.[132]

While posters advertising the show in advance were few, large illustrated banners depicting performers always hung outside sideshow tents. Once posters had attracted crowds to the circus grounds, these banners helped draw those patrons to the sideshow, and they therefore serve much of the same function as advance posters for our purposes. By comparing these different types of promotional art to each other and to photographs, we can examine the similarities in the techniques used to portray these performers regardless of medium. We can also see the elements emphasized

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[132] Durbach.

in photographs, how these could be taken even further in drawn art, and why the techniques circus marketers used to construct this artwork show the intentions and beliefs behind these portrayals.

With sideshow acts, like the others, race and gender could greatly affect the way performers were portrayed. The "Euroamerican freak," Janet M. Davis writes, "performed as a pillar of domestic virtue." For the most part, white sideshow performers were situated inside the "bourgeois patriarchy" and were portrayed as having certain characteristics diametrically opposed from their unique physical trait. Davis provides the examples of dwarfs who, taking after famous predecessor Tom Thumb, were "humorously marketed as men of high military rank, like 'Major' Burdett, 'the world's smallest man'"; she also cites Charles Tripp, "a 'Legless Wonder' with Barnum & Bailey's sideshow [who] was advertised as 'well educated,' 'intelligent, level-headed, and well-informed,' 'a very sociable man' from a solid family." These men were staged in formal Victorian parlor sets with their families like any typical high-society white American man. They were "well-dressed" and "financially successful and dignified." Davis speculates that "audiences perhaps found the domestic scenes especially appealing, because they offered 'proof' that the freak still had functional genitalia, practiced sexual intercourse, and produced children."[133] Showmen, then, framed most white male sideshow acts in ways that emphasized their atypical traits as much as possible while simultaneously praising all the ways they were nevertheless respectable and proper society men. The dramatics with which this was done, though, were inevitably also patronizing. These performers had to make their living by being painted as worthy of respect *because* they were

[133] Davis, *The Circus Age*, 179.

"amazing" in relation to their disability or condition, rather than as respectable regardless of their bodies which already precluded them from most other means of employment in regular society.

White women in the sideshow generally followed this pattern as well, though naturally with the expectation of proper femininity. They were often portrayed as "seemly ladies," their unusual traits and their femininity both exaggerated to highlight the contrast between what an "ideal" white woman in society was expected to be and what they could not fully be. Circus marketing, Davis explains, "placed physically diverse women freaks into the rubric of traditional womanhood by using the visual trappings of normality: gowns, husbands, parlors, and love of home." These portrayals "performed two contradictory functions" in that they partially "normalized physical abnormality by staging these women in normative settings" and communicated a "single standard of ideal womanhood, because showmen marketed each of the women as quintessentially a 'real woman' at heart." On the other hand, though, showmen still "used these standard representations of marriage, motherhood, elaborate dress, and the parlor to poke fun at contemporary gender norms through these visually abnormal bodies."[134]

The bearded lady, to begin, was "defined" by "motherhood and refinement" despite her singularly masculine attribute. Circuses made sure to explain in pamphlets that one such woman had been sought after for marriage by multiple men, and impresarios stated that another could confirm through medical records that she had indeed birthed two children.[135] They also went by feminine names: "Lady Olga, Madame Devere," and "Princess Gracie," to name a few. In photographs, bearded ladies wore elegant dresses with long feminine hairstyles and posed with parlor furniture, mirrors, and occasionally their husbands. Annie Jones, a bearded lady who traveled with Barnum in the late nineteenth century, is shown in various photographs wearing

[134] Ibid., 119-123.
[135] Ibid.

ruffled dresses and holding her incredibly long (head) hair. She also stands in one with her hands behind her back, dramatically puffed upper sleeves, and a tightly bound waist to emphasize her figure. Written promotional material reinforced her traditional femininity that visual depictions accentuated, commenting that despite her "unladylike appendage," she was "a very handsome woman" with "a pretty little foot, neatly turned ankle, and shapely, delicate hands that proclaim her to be of good birth." She was also trained as a musician and was "devoted to that dearest indulgence of feminine fingers, fine embroidery"[136]

Jones is also depicted on several of the Barnum & Bailey sideshow posters (all c. 1900). She looks nearly identical in each one, though her "proper" femininity is exaggerated a bit further in this drawn form. In the photographs above, her sleeves are sometimes short and open, and her hands (when seen) are bare. In these posters, she always wears a dress with very puffy sleeves like in the last photo, as well as long black opera gloves that close any gap of skin. Her waist is arguably even slimmer by the artistic addition of a bodice design of inward-angled black stripes. Another bearded lady, Miss Olga, is also depicted with exaggerated femininity on an 1938 banner. She has a floor-length gown and sits at a table, but the background is much more elaborate than in a regular photography studio. She is in a fancy restaurant with a meal on the table. Behind her, a waiter and some formally-dressed patrons have stopped to lean over from behind curtains and pillars to stare at her in wonder. Her dress also has a fashionable low, off-shoulder neckline, and her breasts are clearly accentuated as her beard falls to almost meet them.[137] Not unlike female animal trainers,

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[136] Bogdan, 224-228; Durbach; Obermuller and Kern, "Annie Jones, Bearded Lady (0941)," 1885, photograph, Special Collections Online, Syracuse University Libraries, 66043; Frank Wendt, "Annie Jones, Bearded Lady (0486)," n.d., photograph, Special Collections Online, Syracuse University Libraries, 65581; Daniel Bates, "EXCLUSIVE: The real-life American Horror Story: Freak Show," *Daily Mail*, Oct. 23, 2015.

[137] "Curieuse Exhibition d'Hommes et Femmes," Barnum & Bailey, ca. 1902, poster, Courmont Freres, the Ringling Museum, Sarasota, ht2000082, online; "Peerless Prodigies of Physical Phenomena," Barnum & Bailey, 1899, poster, Strobridge Lithographing Company, the Ringling Museum, Sarasota, ht2000223, online; Edward J. Kelty, "Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey," May 11, 1938, photograph of band and banners, the Ringling Museum, Sarasota, ht0004839, online.

bearded ladies who might have initially seemed to break gender barriers were actually framed as especially feminine for every other womanly thing they did in spite of their masculine feature.

"Fat ladies" were portrayed as feminine in a more youthful, childish way. One woman with Barnum & Bailey, "Fat Marie" Lil, "presented herself as an innocent English school girl, wearing prim outfits laden with ruffles." Newspapers commented on her "'delightful' complexion, her vast daily diet, her sensitivity and modesty." While a fat lady's size may be inflated in the press, "she was always presented as innocent, never sexually potent."[138] Fat ladies also took infantile names like "Baby Ruth," "Baby Irene," and "Baby Betty."[139] They, too, posed in formal dresses with parlor furniture in studio photographs, and their dresses were almost always sleeveless with a bare upper arm angled towards the camera.[140] They are sometimes shown next to a "human skeleton," an extremely thin sideshow performer, this pairing accentuating each of their special traits. Post-Victorian era photographs almost always show fat ladies in babydoll-style dresses, often with hair accessories and pearls.[141] Poses were fairly casual, arms down or at chest level. If sitting, legs were sometimes bare and crossed with one ankle up on the opposite knee, or they were spread apart under skirts to add width.[142] A poster from 1927 depicts a fat lady like most photographs did.[143]

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[138] Davis, *The Circus Age*, 119-120.
[139] Bates, "EXCLUSIVE"; Walter Heist, Untitled, 1946, photograph of banners, the Ringling Museum, Sarasota, ht0001221, online; "Baby Betty," n.d., photograph, Online Collections Database, Circus World Museum, Baraboo, WI, CWi 3367.
[140] Charles Eisenmann, "Unidentified Fat Lady (0086)," n.d., photograph, Special Collections Online, Syracuse University Libraries, 64779; "Unidentified Fat Lady (0591)," 1870, photograph, Special Collections Online, Syracuse University Libraries, 65689; "Unidentified Fat Lady (0087)," n.d., photograph, Special Collections Online, Syracuse University Libraries, 64780.
[141] Mathew Brady Studio, "Fat Lady and Human Skeleton," ca. 1860-1870, photograph, Frederick Hill Meserve Collection, National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, NPG.81.M1891, online; "Alice from Dallas," n.d., photograph, Online Collections Database, Circus World Museum, Baraboo, WI, CWi 3211; "Amanda Siebert," 1948, photograph, Online Collections Database, Circus World Museum, Baraboo, WI, CWi 2657.
[142] Edward J. Kelty, "Congress of Freaks - Ringling Brothers and Barnum & Bailey Combined Circus," 1925, photograph, the Ringling Museum, Sarasota, ht0004823, online; Edward J. Kelty, "Ringling Brothers and Barnum & Bailey Combined Circus," 1928, photograph, the Ringling Museum, Sarasota, ht0004828, online; Edward J. Kelty, "Ringling Brothers and Barnum & Bailey Combined Sideshows," 1936, photograph, the Ringling Museum, Sarasota, ht0004831, online.
[143] "Al G. Barnes Circus: Side Show," ca. 1927, poster, Erie Lithograph, the Ringling Museum, Sarasota, ht2001090, online.

The banners at the show, however, really set the scene. “Baby Irene” is billed in the 1940s as “650 lbs. of Feminine Charm” and sits among curtains in the expected short sleeveless dress. Her arm is raised and her breasts are emphasized, both elements not present in the other depictions. A fat lady on another banner raises one arm in the air and lifts her dress with her other arm to expose her upper thighs. Unnaturally bone-thin people in formal wear are drawn behind her, far skinnier than real-life human skeletons; they are impossibly slim as if stretched by Procrustes, providing contrast at an even greater extreme that photos.[144] The lifting of the dress and accentuation of the breasts in banners (and not in posters and photographs) stands out; perhaps these circuses who wished to project a proper public image to the world decided that, once the audience was already present within the circus grounds, somewhat sexualizing some of these performers in hopes of attracting patrons into the sideshow tent at that point could not hurt.

Probably the most frequently paired—one of each or two of the same—were those at the extremes of height. For dwarfs and giants, this represented domesticity, but it also emphasized the contrast between the two when paired one with the other. In most group photographs, several dwarfs stand directly next to a giant, leaving a large area of negative space over their heads as the giant’s arms are outstretched above them. The giant's head, adorned with a large hat, is nearly out of frame.[145] With separate pairs of two dwarfs or two giants, subjects are dressed in formal or wedding clothes and staged in formal parlor settings with furniture for a frame of reference.[146]

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[144] Heist, Untitled; Allen J. Lester, Untitled. ca. 1941, photograph of banner, the Ringling Museum, Sarasota, ht0000060, online. See also Davis, *The Circus Age*, 120.
[145] Kelty, “Congress of Freaks - Ringling Brothers and Barnum & Bailey Combined Circus”; Kelty, “Ringling Brothers and Barnum & Bailey Combined Circus”; Kelty, “Ringling Brothers and Barnum & Bailey Combined Sideshows.”
[146] “Mr. and Mrs. Patrick O'Brien,” n.d., photograph, the Circus Collection, National Museum of American History, 74.25.9, online; “Tom Thumb and Wife, midgets (0681),” 1870, photograph, Special Collections Online, Syracuse University Libraries, 65780; “Mrs. Tom Thumb, midget (0885A),” 1895, photograph, Special Collections Online, Syracuse University Libraries, 65987.

Posters used many of the same techniques as photographs, but they were able to exaggerate these height extremes much more than photos could. Giant couples, for instance, were drawn on sideshow banners with their hats cut out off at the top as well.[147] The giants on the Barnum & Bailey posters stand with one or both arms outstretched, too. One particular method that appeared over and over again for dwarfs was to put them on top of tables. This did happen occasionally in photographs—like in a well-known (pre-golden age) one from 1850 where Tom Thumb is standing on a table next to Barnum—but it was not as common of a theme as in drawings. In two posters just mentioned, the dwarfs are both shown standing on top of tables with decorative tablecloths.[148]

In an 1897 Barnum & Bailey poster, an average-sized adult man and young girl stand next to a "giantess" and dwarf. The dwarf is standing on a table and is almost the same size as the doll that the girl is holding in her arms. All are well-dressed and stand elegantly. In case the contrast in the drawing was not evident enough, the text makes sure that the viewer is aware that they are to witness "the littlest and the biggest mortals side by side, a veritable female colossus and her microscopic gentleman escort, the antipodes of humanity, . . . absolutely the tallest lady on earth, a true giantess far exceeding in height all other giants that ever lived. Emphatically the smallest man on earth, a real Liliputian [sic] far less in inches than any other pigmy ever born," and so on.[149] The iconic Tom Thumb and his wife Lavinia Warren were also drawn on top of tables, the "most intelligent little man and woman of any country—the accurate imitations of celebrated

[147] Bert Backstein, Untitled. n.d., photograph of band and banners, the Ringling Museum, Sarasota, ht0001230, online; Edward J. Kelty, "Hagenbeck-Wallace Circus Annex," 1937, photograph of cast and banners, the Ringling Museum, Sarasota, ht0005123, online.

[148] "Curieuse Exhibition d'Hommes et Femmes"; "Peerless Prodigies of Physical Phenomena"; Rachel Adams, "Disability and the Circus," in *The American Circus*, eds. Susan Weber, Kenneth Ames, and Matthew Wittmann (New Haven: Yale University Press, for the Bard Graduate Center, New York, 2012), 422.

[149] "The Largest and The Least of Living Humanity," Barnum & Bailey, 1897, poster, Strobridge Lithographing Company, the Ringling Museum, Sarasota, ht2000176, online.

historical personages." Here Tom Thumb is only as tall as the length of the hand and forearm at Barnum's side as Barnum stands next to them, clearly far shorter than Tom Thumb actually was.[150]

Performers were also put together in pseudo-family groupings on a few posters, further conveying that sense of domestic normalcy. Different categories of performers were given different roles. In one of the few other sideshow posters that seem to exist, a full cast of sideshow performers is shown. Most of the group is in the background, watching as a pair of conjoined sisters play instruments—one piano and one violin—in the center of the frame. On the other side, one extremely tall man in a large hat sits on the ground and watches the twins, surrounded by a dozen dwarfs. He holds some of the dwarfs in his arms; two more sit propped up on his shoulders like curious children. Everyone is dressed formally, except for the giant, who is dressed like a cowboy. The scene comes across as very familial; the women are mother figures performing for the family, while the giant stands in as a father to the dwarf "children" who watch. In another poster, a smiling sideshow cast sits together in a giant baby buggy pushed by an enormous clown. Four formally-dressed dwarfs are at the front and a giant man in a soldier uniform and tall hat is at the back. One Ubangi woman is even included in this group along with the other standard roles of bearded lady, fat lady, living skeleton, etc. The poster seems to satirically comment on these traditional expectations of a "normal" American family in a way that both endorses them yet also points out the absurdity of the idea of people like these forming a family unit.[151]

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[150] "Tom Thumb and Wife," Barnum & London, 1881, poster, the Ringling Museum, Sarasota, ht2004490, online. In the photograph discussed on p. 70 where Tom Thumb is standing on a table next to Barnum, Tom Thumb is as tall as from Barnum's mid-thigh up to his shoulders.

[151] "Strange People from the Remote Corners of the Earth," Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey, n.d., poster, Erie Lithograph, the Ringling Museum, Sarasota, ht2001558, online; "Hagenbeck-Wallace & Forepaugh Sells Bros.: Side Show," n.d., poster, Erie Lithograph, the Ringling Museum, Sarasota, ht2000875, online.

The portrayal of racial othering that was fundamental to large "exotic" displays like the ethnological congress was also present in the freak show, and performers were similarly almost never shown on posters or individually named. Davis explains that sideshow men of color, like those in the ethnological congress, were often limited to roles like “wild man,” “‘royal’ savage,” and “childlike ‘primitive.’” Black performers in particular “were often staged as actual apes, ‘underdeveloped’ men, or exemplars of masculine ‘savagery.’” She cites here two main examples, though one of them was not affiliated with the actual circus; the other is William Henry Johnson, who was presented in a “wild” manner and contractually obligated to remain silent on stage. She explains that “as a mute ‘savage,’ Johnson had a public persona that complemented contemporary ideologies concerning race and manhood” which arguably “kept him ‘fixed’ in an earlier stage of development—similar to the ‘noisy and irrepressible child’ that he was supposed to be.” Further, “Johnson’s race kept manliness, and all its associations with whiteness and the respectable family, out of his ‘developmental’ grasp.” She concludes that “unlike the Euroamerican freak, Johnson, a bachelor, was never staged in a fancy parlor setting with a wife and children.”[152]

While this is true, there is much more nuance if we were to attempt to extrapolate this claim to all non-white freaks. We will return to Johnson later in this chapter. Other instances of sideshow performers of color billed as “exotic” and “wild” include the individuals or small groups of African-Americans as “Zulus,” South Pacific islanders as cannibals, and the "Ubangis" and "Giraffe-Neck Women" discussed in chapter three.[153] As explained, any real distinction in the construction of performed identity of people of “exotic races” in the larger ethnological congress versus the freak show is all but nonexistent, regardless of what part of the show they were in.

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[152] Davis, *The Circus Age*, 182-183. Her first example is of a man named Ota Benga, a Batwa pygmy who was part of a “human zoo” exhibit in the Bronx zoo during 1906. He was put in a literal cage against his will alongside an orangutan in the Monkey House. He committed suicide ten years later.
[153] Bogdan, 176-178.

Not all presentations of race in the sideshow were as straightforward as the ethnographic display—they could contain both the formality of white performers and the exoticism of racial elements. They could also be described differently in different sources, as well as change over time. One of the most evident cases of non-white freaks presented in this formal, Victorian way is a case of conjoined twins. The "original" famous "Siamese" twins that toured in the mid-nineteenth century, Chang and Eng, were depicted in their early careers in "Oriental" costuming. Later on, though, they appeared in formal clothes and parlor-like settings, sometimes with their families.[154] After them, Millie and Christine were a well-known African-American pair of conjoined twins who performed throughout the last third of the nineteenth century. Like most white women, the sisters were dressed in formal clothing and photographed in parlor scenes. One colorful lithograph even shows them in a formal dress and opera gloves, shaking hands with and speaking to two likewise well-dressed white couples and children in a fancy room. The twins also sang as part of their act and were dubbed "The Two-Headed Nightingale." In all of these ways, they are similar to white conjoined sisters Violet and Daisy Hilton. (The Hiltons played several instruments, and are likely the two pictured to be playing the piano and violin in one of the posters above).[155]

Numerous reports also commented on Millie and Christine's beauty. One medical report described them as "pleasing to the eye" with their "splendid Caucasian heads." Queen Victoria even saw them when they toured in England and expressed that they were "very dark coloured, if

[154] Durbach; "Chang and Eng and Family (0617)," 1870, photograph, Special Collections Online, Syracuse University Libraries, 65715.
[155] "Millie-Christine, Siamese Twins (0607)," 1870, photograph, Special Collections Online, Syracuse University Libraries, 65705; "Millie-Christine, Siamese Twins (0866)," 1895, photograph. Special Collections Online, Syracuse University Libraries, 65967; "Millie Christine the Renowned Two-Headed Lady," ca. 1881, poster, Strobridge Lithograph Co. Online Collections Database, Circus World Museum, Baraboo, WI, CWi 20997; Jonathan Mayo, "How British conjoined twins Violet and Daisy Hilton became Hollywood stars," *Daily Mail*, June 10, 2018, online; Bogdan, 207.

not exactly negroes & [they] look[ed] very merry and happy."[156] The sisters also, though, were depicted in an advertisement drawing as very light-skinned, if not outright white, which is particularly interesting considering the medical report of their "splendid Caucasian heads." They were also usually referred to as "Millie Christine," the "Two Headed-Lady" in the singular, something that other conjoined twins like Chang and Eng or Violet and Daisy did not seem to experience.[157] As an additional note, conjoined twins, too, were sometimes presented with partners if they had them; aside from the photographs of Chang and Eng, a Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey sideshow poster was made of "Siamese Twins Born Joined Together" playing tennis and "Presented with Their Brides" in the background.[158]

Other photographs of formal-looking performers of color can be found here and there in museum archives or on auction sites. One of these is of a Black man called "Deacon James Finch," a giant and "fat man" (his postcard says that he was seven feet, seven inches tall and weighed 670 pounds). He stands in a neutral position, and wears trousers, dress shoes, an overcoat, and a top hat, much like white male giants did. Another performer who appeared on several postcards is "Princess Wee-Wee," a Black dwarf which one photo postcard claimed to have weighed only twelve pounds at age twenty-three. She is pictured in several photos, even as a small child, in dresses and parlor scenes.[159]

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[156] Millie and Christine were once evidently described as "a horribly repulsive negro monstrosity" and "hideous human deformity" that should be "hid[den] from public view" rather than be "hawked over the country to satisfy the greed of a couple of sideshow exhibitors"— but this was by a competing circus who "could not find a comparable performer and relied on racist and derogatory advertisements to defame her reputation." They later sued for defamation, though it was never adjudicated. Rogers, "Shelburne Museum," 145-149.

[157] "W. C. Coup's Equescurriculum: December 23, 1878," ink on paper, the Ringling Museum, Sarasota, ht4000340, online; "Millie Christine the Renowned Two-Headed Lady." Newspapers even debated over whether or not Millie and Christine were one or two people: "Freak Progenies," *Grand Forks Daily Herald* (Grand Forks, ND), Feb. 12, 1896, America's Historical Newspapers (Readex).

[158] "The Siamese Twins," Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey, ca. 1930, poster, Erie Lithograph, the Ringling Museum, Sarasota, ht2001590, online.

[159] "Deacon James Finch," n.d., photograph, Stuart A. Rose Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University, online; Kraus Mfg. Co. (N.Y.), "Princess Wee-Wee, age 23," n.d., photograph, Stuart A. Rose

Robert Bogdan, scholar of sociology and disability studies, points out how people with atypical bodies, especially those performers of color, could also be framed in both ways throughout their careers—either to look like most of their white counterparts, or to fit with other non-white, typically bodied people presented as exotic. He places two photographs side by side of the same Black performer, a giant, dressed in one photo in a soldier uniform as an "aggrandized military figure" and in the other as an "exotic Zulu" with stereotypical "savage" clothing and weaponry. Numerous others were consistently depicted in ways that combined both these "aggrandizing" elements (like with white giants and dwarfs) and racial elements. Ella Grigsby, the "Tallest Lady in the World," was photographed in sophisticated poses with opulent gowns and jewelry. She, a Black woman born in South Carolina, was billed as "Abomah, the African Amazon Giantess." Che-Mah, the "Chinese Dwarf," was photographed wearing traditional Chinese clothing while standing in a Victorian parlor with tall arches and a classical column in the background.[160]

"Chang-Yu-Sing, the Chinese Giant" was, like Che-Mah, always shown in Chinese-style clothing, and staged alternately in European-style parlor settings and stereotypical Chinese-looking backgrounds. In one photo, he appears in a room very similar to Che-Mah, with a classical marble statue, lofty arches, and Corinthian columns in the background. One poster also combines symbols of both cultures by showing him in a Western parlor-type room, though the paintings on the wall look like nature landscapes of Asia. Here, Yu-Sing looks very gentle and paternal: he has a soft expression as he holds a white baby, and multiple Victorian women hold their babies up for him to hold too. The babies and other surrounding children have their arms stretched upward,

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Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University, online; Frank Wendt, "Princess Wee Wee," ca. 1913, photograph, *International Center of Photography*, 2011.42.13, online.

[160] Bogdan, 19, 113; "77. ABOMAH (Ella Grigsby). Pair of Postcards of Abomah, 'Tallest Lady in the World.' 1900s," ca. 1900s, photograph, reproduced in *Circus Sideshow & Oddities*, Potter & Potter Auctions catalog, public auction #102, June 26, 2021, p. 17, online; Charles Eisenmann, "Che-Mah, Chinese Dwarf (0062)," n.d., photograph. Special Collections Online, Syracuse University Libraries, 64754; Frank Wendt, "Pearley and Che-Mah," ca. 1899, photograph, Digital Collections, Buffalo Bill Center of the West, P.69.1766, online.

requesting to be picked up. Yet another Barnum poster shows him outside surrounded by a white Victorian audience and towering over a wall in front of archetypal Chinese-looking architecture. There is also a window lattice design and a vertical banner on one side with what is meant to look like Chinese writing on it, though the script appears to be nonsense made by a non-speaker for non-speaking viewers (though it is no surprise that authenticity and accuracy were not marketers', especially Barnum's, goals, whether due to intentional deception or just lack of care). Some of the (English) text between the two posters praises how Yu-Sing is "the most gigantic & finely proportioned man in existence" with "perfect form & stature," has "traveled throughout the civilized world," and is an "educated and refined gentleman speaking 26 languages fluently" who is "acknowledged to be the most extraordinary wonder of the world."[161]

Krao, a girl from Laos with a beard and thick, dark body hair, is a case in point of how the portrayal of some performers changed during their careers. Krao performed under titles including the "gorilla girl" and "missing link"—another common character type—throughout her life, especially as a child. Scientific testimonies that confirmed the "authenticity" of such "missing link" claims abounded in press releases. One photograph of her as a young child has her posed crouched over, naked, clinging to a well-dressed white man. In addition to being posed in "ape-like" positions, she was often staged in jungle-like settings. Not only was she herself a "missing link"; she was also "claimed to be part of a whole race of 'ape-people,'" a "'typical Siamese' suffering from a 'pathological condition.'" As she got older, however, the way she was portrayed evolved; in a cabinet card photo from 1892 where she is sixteen years old, she is staged much like bearded white women with a gown, styled hair, parlor table, and book. By then, she had gone from

[161] "Chang-Yu-Sing, the Chinese Giant," ca. 1880s, photograph, the Circus Collection, National Museum of American History, PG.74.25.12, online; "The Chinese Goliath, Chang-Tu-Sing," Barnum & London, 1880s, poster, Strobridge Lithographing Company, the Ringling Museum, Sarasota, ht2004480, online; "Chang Yu Sing," Barnum & London, 1881, poster, Strobridge Lithographing Company, the Ringling Museum, Sarasota, ht2004485, online.

a "mysterious vestige of prehistoric humanity" to a "civilized primitive" whose exposure to Western civilization had "uplifted" her. Still, despite her "'faultless' manners," she actually performed throughout her lifetime in "minimal dress as an affirmation of racial 'authenticity.'"[162]

White performers with disabilities were not exempt from being compared to animals. "Koo Koo the Bird Girl," for example, whose appearance self-explanatively resembled a bird's, was dressed in a costume of feathers with a towering plume on her head. She was caricatured in her sideshow banner, her nose made longer and pointier like a beak and her legs very long and skinny to bending like a bird's. The feather on her head looks to grow directly from her scalp. A few other such performers include Fred Wilson, the "Lobster Boy," who had ectrodactyly, and Moses Jerome, the "Elephant Boy," who had elephantiasis of the legs. Both of the latter two, though, were photographed in formal settings like other white performers.[163] Most disabled white performers who were likened to animals were then not animals in the sense of "missing links," but rather given these dramatic and derogatory names for purposes of sensationalism and relatability.

Sometimes, though, the portrayal of atypical bodies *was* as derogatively racialized as at the ethnographic display, and the intersection with race exacerbated this. These conceptions of race and freakishness were particularly complicated for performers with specific conditions, like ones

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[162] Photograph reproduced in Jerry Bergman, "Darwin's apemen and the exploitation of deformed humans," *TJ* 16.3 (2002): 119, CiteSeerX; "21. Cabinet Photo of Krao Farini, 'The Missing Link.' New York: Charles Eisenmann, ca. 1892," photograph, reproduced in *Circus Sideshow & Oddities*, Potter & Potter Auctions catalog, public auction #102, June 26, 2021, p. 6, online; Davis, *The Circus Age*, 128-130.

[163] "Ringling Brothers and Barnum & Bailey Combined Side Shows"; identified in Bogdan, 4-5; Edward J. Kelty, "World Circus Side Show," 1926, photograph of cast and banners, the Ringling Museum, Sarasota, ht0005063, online; "Fred Wilson, The Lobster Boy (0249)," n.d., photograph, Special Collections Online, Syracuse University Libraries, 65340; Charles Eisenmann, "Moses Jerome, Elephant Boy (0004)," n.d., photograph, Special Collections Online, Syracuse University Libraries, 64694.

that affected the face/head, body proportions, and skin pigment.[164] By this, I mean to distinguish from many of those performers mentioned previously with conditions like proportionate dwarfism, conjoined twins where one or both appeared "normal" in form aside from the conjoining, fat ladies, etc. Just as race influenced portrayal in the freak show, certain conditions affecting the face or entire form were also used to "racialize" people as freaks, white or non-white.[165]

This was overwhelmingly the case for performers with microcephaly. Albinism was also sometimes a factor. White Americans with microcephaly could be cast in the "exotic mode" as being from the South Pacific islands or South America. Once, in the 1930s, a white American man and woman with microcephaly were claimed to be "Bobo and Kiki," "albinos from a head-binding tribe in Africa." Maximo and Bartola, a brother-and-sister pair from El Salvador who both had microcephaly, are photographed with their hair in fan-shaped afro styles and wearing clothing adorned with Aztec-looking sun designs. They were billed as "The Last of the Ancient Aztecs of Mexico." Showmen were incredibly shameless about their outlandish and vicious portrayals of these acts, too; one successful sideshow manager commented about Bobo and Kiki in his autobiography: "None of the things I had said or would be saying about the pinheads was true. They were plain old white American microcephalics, more popularly known as 'pinheads,' but you can't tell people, 'Now, we've got these idiots here; take a good look at them.'"[166]

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[164] Some of these performers would have been categorized as "monsters, the medical term for people born with a demonstrable difference." Even this term, though, if we were to still use it today, does not include everyone I am referring to here. See Bogdan, 6-7: "To the joy (and often at the instigation) of showmen, debates raged among scientists and laypersons alike as to whether a particular exhibit actually represented a new species or was simply a lusus naturae. In the last quarter of the nineteenth century the blurred distinction between species and freaks of nature became moot; all human exhibits, including tribal people of normal stature and body configuration, as well as people who performed unusual feats such as swallowing swords, fell under the generic term freak."

[165] There were occasional outliers, like the "Bird Girl" mentioned above. This, though, was the general pattern. The shape of her head was also affected by her disorder. Thus, though I mentioned her above in the animal section, she could also fit partially in here. The fact that she does not fit into any of the numerous categories I have tried to lay out only further shows how complicated the structure and categorization of the freak show was.

[166] Bogdan, 111-112, 127-128, 143-144.

"Eko and Iko," a pair of albino African-American brothers actually named George and Willie Muse, were presented early in their career as "monkey men," "Darwin's missing links," "'sheep-headed cannibals' from the South Seas," "Ecuadorean white savages," "ministers from Dahomey," and simply "peculiar people." They are drawn in the Dahomey banner with wild white hair and beards floating around them in a sun-like shape, spotted robes, and a shooting star and Saturn in the background, all clearly as if they are in space. This depiction makes much more sense after seeing two more banners that call them "Ambassadors from Mars." In one, they have hair that also seems to float around them, long robe-like garments with large suns designs on the chest, and fitted pants with a diagonal striped/diamond pattern. In the other, they wear suits with sashes, dress shoes, and white gloves. Their hair is still quite big but does not blatantly defy gravity, and they stand proudly on the surface of a planet with another planet in the sky behind them. This last banner much more closely matches how they looked in several photographs, down to the outfits and hairstyle (suits with blond dreadlocks styled high up on their heads).[167]

We now return to William Henry Johnson. Born in New Jersey, he performed from 1860 to 1926. Throughout his career, he was billed vaguely as a "wild boy" and "nondescript"; racially as a "Siamese tree-dweller," an Aztec, and also as a Martian; and even mysteriously as a "What Is It?" act. It is not confirmed but it is speculated that he had microcephaly since he had a very similar appearance to others with the condition, his head having a "sharp point and small size." He is shown in photos to have worn suit of fur and neutral expression. He also had a shaved head save

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[167] Bogdan, 115; "Kidnapped, Then Forced Into The Sideshow," *NPR*; Edward J. Kelty, "Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus," n.d., photograph of band and banners, the Ringling Museum, Sarasota, ht0004844, online; Edward J. Kelty, "Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey," July 3, 1937, photograph of band and banners, the Ringling Museum, Sarasota, ht0004841, online; RSM, Untitled, Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus, 1927, photograph of banners, the Ringling Museum, Sarasota, ht0001280, online; Charles Clarke, "Sideshow Bannerline," n.d., photograph of banners, Circus & Allied Arts collection, Special Collections, Milner Library, Illinois State University, clarkeneg_box05_338, online; Kelty, "Congress of Freaks - Ringling Brothers and Barnum & Bailey Combined Circus"; Kelty, "Ringling Brothers and Barnum & Bailey Combined Circus."

for a small triangular bit of hair at the top of his head to exaggerate the pointed shape, a grass skirt, and/or a wooden pole of sorts in his hand.[168] In Johnson's earliest days at Barnum's museum, an advertisement shows the "**WHAT IS IT**?" in this outfit of fur with a wooden stick, but the expression is frightening and animalistic, mouth wide-open in a horrific half-grin. He stands upright with a slight crouch, and his feet resemble hands with long "thumbs" on the sides. The background consists of dense jungle vegetation. The caption asks if "it" is "a lower order of **MAN**! Or is it a higher order of **MONKEY**! None can tell! Perhaps it is a combination of both. . . . It was captured in a savage state in Central Africa," and it is "intelligent, docile, active, sportive, and PLAYFUL AS A KITTEN. It has the skull, limbs and general anatomy of an **ORANG OUTANG** [orangutan] and the COUNTENANCE of a **HUMAN BEING**." Though the words describe him as innocent and playful, the expression on the picture is nothing short of terrifying. "It" looks like a creature, and the creature looks hungry.[169]

This drawing of the "What Is It?" is just one particularly convincing case of how these drawings could influence an audience's expectations and perception. Though not used nearly as much as main show posters would be, the illustrated advertisements, sideshow banners, and posters that did exist were able to convey vicious racism and ableism in a certain way impossible for words or photographs to do. No matter how different a person's body looked from the typical viewer, and no matter how photographers staged and framed them, an actual photo of a person performing as a "freak" still captured at least a bit of their inalienable humanity, even if it was disguised. Posters and drawings, though, could completely transform their subjects into near-animals.

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[168] Davis. *The Circus Age*, 182; Charles Eisenmann, "Zip the Pinhead (0025)," n.d, photograph, Special Collections Online, Syracuse University Libraries, 64715.

[169] Image reproduced in Betsy Golden Kellem, "This is Me: Curiosity, Oddity & Race on P.T. Barnum's Stage," *Fugitive Leaves, The Historical Medical Library of the Studies of The College of Physicians of Philadelphia*, Feb. 10, 2018, http://histmed.collegeofphysicians.org/this-is-me/. See also Rachel Adams, "Freaks of culture: institutions, publics and the subjects of ethnographic knowledge," in *The Routledge Circus Studies Reader*, eds. Peta Tait and Katie Lavers (London: Routledge, 2016, Ebook, 2020), 245.

Ultimately, sideshow performers exhibited for their atypical bodies were presented in a wide range of ways that were dependent on gender, race, and the specific “type” of body they had. White performers were usually aggrandized and made prim and proper to fit within conventional societal expectations; performers of color were often outside of this frame altogether as “exotic” ethnographic displays that could be savage or outright animalistic. Non-white performers with conditions that did not affect their face, skin color, or bodily proportions were often cast in the same light as white performers, and the inverse was true for white performers with these conditions. When multiple factors combined, this intersection further compounded the “othering” element. Every way—or in several ways at once—that a person could be separated and labeled as “other,” whether their atypical body had to be twisted to fit into society or excluded them from it, showed the public how “normal” they, within the standards they conformed to, were in contrast. Some performers had deviance balanced with decorum; others were presented as purely grotesque, serving as foils to the ideal American viewer. By identifying and dramatizing what made "freaks" different, the sideshow, instead of promoting acceptance, reinforced conventional American values of propriety and kept performers and audiences on opposite sides of the tightrope.

Conclusion

The circus business worked hard to portray a specific image to the public, and for the most part, it was successful. Showmen, though, could not do this alone, just as much as they could not have any circus at all without the performers. The way the circus presented itself required both marketers and performers to carefully calculate every detail in order to create a perfect balance of propriety and deviance; marketers did the initial construction, and performers had to maintain it. It was not just the tightrope walkers, then, but *everyone* involved in the circus that were truly the funambulists.

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ACADEMIC VITA

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SELECTION OF RESEARCH COURSEWORK

Honors Thesis in History — Spring 2022

- "The Funambulists: Balancing Propriety and Deviance in the Portrayal of American Circus Performers, 1870s-1940s"

ENU44018 | Victorian Gothic Literature | Trinity College Dublin — Fall 2021

- Final paper: "Women Authors and the Supernatural: Ghost Stories as a Medium for the Living"

HIST 266Y | Sexuality and Violence in Nineteenth-Century America — Spring 2020

- Final paper: "Violence at Circuses in Nineteenth-Century America"

HIST 405 | The Roman Empire — Spring 2020

- Final paper: "Women in Public Entertainment in Ancient Rome"

HIST 302W | Undergraduate Seminar in Medieval Travel, Trade, and Exploration — Fall 2019

- Final paper: "Women's Roles in Craft Guilds in Medieval Europe"

WORK & SERVICE EXPERIENCE

Writing Peer Tutor | The Pennsylvania State University — Sep – Dec 2019

- Engaged with students from a variety of academic disciplines, backgrounds, ages, and first languages
- Collaborated with writers to discuss their writing and encourage critical thinking
- Formed positive relationships with students and gave constructive feedback to improve their work

Curatorial Department Volunteer | Erie County Historical Society — May – Aug 2019

- Led the planning of a women's suffrage exhibit and partook in its design, creation, and final display
- Sorted through, categorized, and cataloged hundreds of artifacts using designated museum software
- Worked as part of a team to plan and execute an event with dozens of guests

Club Member Volunteer | Days for Girls at Penn State — Nov 2019 – May 2020 | Jan – May 2022

- Campus branch of Days for Girls, an international service organization working to end period poverty
- Hand make components of sustainable menstrual kits to distribute to those in need around the globe
- Advocate for the health and education of menstruators to reduce stigma and increase life opportunities

SKILLS

- Writing
- Research
- Copyediting
- Project management
- Attention to detail
- Exceptional organization