

Betty Broadbent: “The Lady Who’s Different”

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Abstract: As one of the most famous circus performers in early twentieth-century American culture, Betty Broadbent’s extreme appearance mirrored other tattooed performers at the time. However, Fabiani explores the ways that Broadbent deviated from the common social and cultural practices of tattooed circus women by resisting sexual objectification, breaking from the boundaries of the freak show stage, and rejecting captivity narratives. Broadbent’s circus career spanned four decades, but this article focuses on the peak of her popularity from her debut in 1927 to the outbreak of World War II. This essay identifies Broadbent as a unique case within her subculture in an effort to critically deconstruct the social context of negative stigmas and gendered normativity that dominated American tattooing practices at the time. Employing a vast primary source base, Fabiani demonstrates that Broadbent really was “the lady who’s different.”

Covered in tattoos from head to foot, with the inked faces of American icons gazing out over large audiences, the appearance of Betty Broadbent did not especially differ from other tattooed performers in early twentieth-century American circuses. However, her actions both on and off freak show stages illuminate her as a woman who broke the mold of this profession and upset generalizations about women in this subculture. Current literature on tattooed circus women highlights characteristics shared by these performers, but rarely showcases deviations from common traits and practices.¹ Here, I examine the

¹ Significant scholarship exists on early twentieth-century circus performers and provides the base arguments that this article both supports and challenges. For discussions of domestic circus life, see Katherine H. Adams, and Michael L. Keene, *Women of the American Circus, 1880-1940* (North Carolina: McFarland & Co. Inc., 2012). For information on tattooed circus performers; see Margo DeMello, *Encyclopedia of Body Adornment* (Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 2007). For analyses of tattooed circus women, see Beverly Yuen Thompson, *Covered in Ink: Tattoos, Women, and the Politics of the Body* (New York: New York University Press, 2014); Margot Mifflin, *Bodies of Subversion: A Secret History of Women and Tattoo*. (New York: Powerhouse Books, 1997); Christine Braunberger, “Revolting

ways Broadbent lived up to the moniker used to announce her circus performances—she truly was “the lady who’s different.”² Broadbent both fit into *and* complicated modern assumptions about tattooed circus women. She destabilized hegemonic gender roles and ideals of respectable femininity because her performances participated in normative discourses in ways atypical of her contemporaries. This analysis of Broadbent reveals gender as a flexible code constantly challenged and reconfigured by deviant bodies.

Broadbent mirrored some traits of other women in this profession with her financial self-sufficiency, the sexual elements of her performances, and her patriotic tattoo imagery. Tattooed circus women largely conformed to stereotypes that impacted American women, specifically the gendered domestic roles and conventional feminine behavior and beauty. However, I demonstrate that Broadbent explicitly rejected certain expected practices of her career, specifically sexual objectification, spatial regulations, and captivity narratives.

Broadbent, born Sue Lillian Brown in 1909, moved from Florida to Atlantic City at age 14 for a baby-sitting job. She recalled, “When I went to the boardwalk on my days off, I saw a tattooed man ... that’s when I decided to get tattooed.”³ She took her savings to New York City and spent the next two years under the needle of pioneer tattooist Charlie Wagner.⁴ She started her circus career in 1927 as the “youngest tattooed woman in the world” with the Ringling Brothers and Barnum & Bailey Circus.⁵ Broadbent was one of “about 300 completely tattooed men and women” in America who earned their living “by exhibiting themselves.”⁶ For the next four decades she travelled with various circuses and became one of the most famous tattooed performers in the country. She even toured Australia and New Zealand for a year, returning to America to work at John Hix’s *Strange As It Seems* display at the 1939 World’s Fair.⁷ Broadbent ended her circus career in 1967 at age 57 as “one of the last working tattooed

Bodies: The Monster Beauty of Tattooed Women,” *NWSA* 12 (2) 2000: 1-23; Amelia Osterud, *The Tattooed Lady: A History* (Colorado: Speck Press, 2009); Victoria Pitts, *In the Flesh: The Cultural Politics of Body Modification* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003).

² Judy Aurre, “Meet Betty Broadbent,” *Tattoo Historian* 1 (1982): 21.

³ Aurre, “Meet Betty Broadbent,” *Tattoo Historian*, 21.

⁴ DeMello, *Encyclopedia of Body Adornment*, 51.

⁵ Osterud, *The Tattooed Lady*, 112.

⁶ Albert Parry, *Tattoo: Secrets of a Strange Art* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1933), 73.

⁷ Osterud, *The Tattooed Lady*, 112.

ladies in the country.”⁸ She reminisced on her decision to retire and claimed, “I was too old—it wasn’t for me. I decided it was time for me to sit back and let the young folks have at it.”⁹ Broadbent ultimately had “no regrets for having chosen this unusual career path” and stated in a 1981 interview: “I really loved it.”¹⁰

Broadbent’s circus career spanned four decades, but this article focuses on the peak of her popularity from her debut in 1927 to the outbreak of World War II. To understand Broadbent as a unique tattooed circus woman, I situate her subculture in the larger social context of negative stigmas and gendered normativity that dominated American tattooing practices in this period. I then address the academic literature surrounding tattooed circus women of the 1920s and 1930s. Scholars tend to highlight the financial motivations behind these women’s career choice, their patriotic tattoo imagery, their on-stage sexualization, and their domestic lives when “on the circuit” as key traits that link them to a distinct subculture.¹¹ However, the focus on similarities reduces the lives and performances of these circus women to a homogenous challenge of women’s place in American society as “the second sex,” and overlooks the nuances that disturb these generalizations.¹² I showcase Broadbent as an important example of defiance that unsettles modern simplifications and demands recognition of diverse, non-uniform histories.

Three key examples of Broadbent’s practices exclude her from stereotypes of tattooed circus women. She struggled to deliver ‘clean’ performances, resisting sexual objectification beyond the scanty costumes required to display her tattooed skin. She broke from the confinement of freak show stages when she appeared in the first

⁸ Mifflin, *Bodies of Subversion*, 25.

⁹ Aurre, “Meet Betty Broadbent,” *Tattoo Historian*, 40.

¹⁰ Quotation from circus promotional material, postcard of Broadbent, 1950, found in Osterud, *The Tattooed Lady*, 113; Aurre, “Meet Betty Broadbent,” *Tattoo Historian*, 40.

¹¹ Adams and Keene, *Women of the American Circus*, 66. The cited works by Braunberger, Mifflin, Osterud, Pitts, and Thompson all identify women in this profession as a distinct subculture, governed by its own rules and standards of practice. For further subculture theory, see Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (London: Methuen & Co, 1979).

¹² “Second sex” refers to Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex* (1949), a canonical feminist work that explored the subservient role imposed on women throughout history and the generational conditioning that kept women in inferior positions to men. See Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. and ed. H.M. Parshley (New York: Vintage Books, 1989).

televised beauty contest at the 1939 World's Fair in New York.¹³ She displayed her tattooed body in an unconventional space and challenged ideals of respectable femininity and beauty that this contest celebrated and reinforced.¹⁴ Lastly, Broadbent rejected captivity narratives used by other tattooed performers to explain the origin of their body ink. These tales drew power from existing racial tensions and enabled performers to position themselves as victims of defilement. They could then shirk responsibility for their deviant appearances. These examples of agency remain largely overlooked in modern scholarship and the significance of Broadbent's actions merit recognition and analysis to better understand the complexity of the past.

The voice of "the century's most photographed, best loved tattooed woman" remains elusive. Broadbent gave few interviews and left no written record of her experiences in travelling circuses. Furthermore, restricted access to these sources hinders historical research.¹⁵ For example, a 1982 interview with Broadbent resides with the Tattoo Archive, a collective managed by established tattooists and self-proclaimed tattoo historians. Although the website claims that "a wealth of knowledge is available just for the asking," my own research requests were denied because they were "not interested in being part of

¹³ For discussion of Broadbent at the 1939 World's Fair, see Osterud, *The Tattooed Lady*, 112; Mifflin, *Bodies of Subversion*, 25; Braunberger, "Revolutionary Bodies," 13.

¹⁴ It is important to note the distinction between "born freaks," "made freaks," and "novelty acts." According to these classifications, "born freaks" had a physical anomaly that made them unusual (such as Siamese twins or limbless people), "made freaks" rendered themselves unusual (such as tattooed performers), and "novelty acts" displayed an unusual performance (such as swallowing swords or charming snakes). See W. Gresham, *Monster Midway* (New York: Rinehart, 1948), 25-31. Gresham neglected to mention "the racial freak," who were not physically deviant in the context of their own culture, but their presence in the United States as examples of primitiveness served as the basis for their display. For further discussion of these classifications, see Leonard Cassuto, "'What an object he would have made of me!': Tattooing and the Racial Freak in Melville's Typee," in *Freakery: Cultural Spectacles of the Extraordinary Body*, 241-245; A.W. Stencell, *Circus and Carnival Ballyhoo: Sideshow Freaks, Jugglers and Blade Box Queens* (Toronto, ECW Press, 2010), 29-35; Robert Bogdan, "The Social Construction of Freaks," in *Freakery: Cultural Spectacles of the Extraordinary Body*, 28-29.

¹⁵ Mifflin, *Bodies of Subversion*, 24. For more on the merits and challenges of using oral histories in academic research, see Paul Thompson, *The Voice of the Past: Oral History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); Anna Clark, "Talking About History: A Case for Oral Historiography," *Public History Review* 17 (December 2010): 62-76.

[my] project.”¹⁶ Due to scant and restricted archival records, I have used newspaper and magazine articles, promotional circus materials, staged and candid photographs, interviews with family and employers, and her tattoos themselves to uncover and reconstruct Broadbent’s experiences as a tattooed circus performer in early twentieth-century America.¹⁷

Broadbent’s World

American tattooed performers reached the height of their popularity in the 1920s and 1930s, at which point tattooed women achieved greater success than their male counterparts. Aside from the allure of travel and fame, tattooed women pursued this career for the financial independence it promised. Broadbent herself quit her job as a nanny “to undergo the tattooing operation in hopes of a circus fortune.”¹⁸ High rates of pay attracted individuals to this circus career but white, able-bodied men generally enjoyed more opportunities for a stable income outside of the circus than minority groups.¹⁹ Women, on the other hand, had “little chance for an education, highly paid work, or travel” and some viewed circus life as “the only way ... to have an independent career,” especially as this profession “could command large salaries, up to \$100-\$200 per week.”²⁰ In the 1930s, historian Albert Parry contended that women entered this traditionally male-dominated profession because they “longed for the profits of a tattooed body.”²¹

The independent lifestyle represented by ‘the tattooed lady’ may explain the appeal this career had to women.²² The apparent

¹⁶ The Tattoo Archive, accessed Mar. 25, 2016, <http://www.tattooarchive.com/>; C.W. Eldridge, email to C. Fabiani, Jan. 27, 2016. No other reasons were given for my access denials, which leads to speculation. This tattoo collective may be anti-academic, territorial about tattoo history, and/or discriminatory against women re-writing women’s histories.

¹⁷ Albert Parry’s *Tattoo: Secrets of a Strange Art* (1933) also provides invaluable first-hand insights into the social attitudes towards tattooed bodies both on and off early twentieth-century circus stages.

¹⁸ Parry, *Tattoo*, 64, 75.

¹⁹ Amelia Klem, “A Life of Her Own Choosing: Anna Gibbons’ Fifty Years as a Tattooed Lady,” *The Wisconsin Magazine of History* 89:3 (2006): 32.

²⁰ DeMello, *Encyclopedia of Body Adornment*, 261-2. Note that this weekly salary equates to \$1300-\$2700 in 2017.

²¹ Parry, *Tattoo*, 64.

²² Ironically, their bodies excluded tattooed women from normative society but “gave them access to a world outside the home, free from ... many restrictions otherwise

freedom of tattooed circus women differed from the financial positions of average American women who commonly remained dependent on a man, usually a husband or father. Contemporary scholars argue that circus women took part in “a bold rebellion against women’s place in American society” and identify feminist elements in their performances.²³ Margot Mifflin, the current authority on women with tattoos, claims that these circus performers used their positions “as a premise for trampling conventional standards of feminine beauty and behaviour.”²⁴ However, archival evidence and testimonies of tattooed circus women do not reflect conscious resistance, but instead show that these women became tattooed “to make a living.”²⁵ Broadbent clearly articulated the financial motivations behind her career path when she stated in an interview, “I went into the circus as a business venture . . . I wanted to be independent and to take care of myself.”²⁶ Her second husband, circus ventriloquist Charlie Roark, stated, “she wanted to be her own woman—she never wanted to be dependent on anyone for anything.”²⁷

Broadbent was not alone in the pursuit of financial stability. A career in the circus provided women the freedom to “shape their own adult lives, finding meaningful work for which they are respected and well compensated.”²⁸ Broadbent’s contemporary, Anna “Artoria” Gibbons, became tattooed “as a matter of survival” because she “didn’t have any money.”²⁹ Parry reported that Mae Vandermark, one of the first tattooed performers with the Ringling Brothers Circus, was “hesitant to mar [herself] for life” until testimonies of high salaries “easily persuaded [her] to become a professional tattooed woman.”³⁰ Tattooed circus women, including Broadbent, chose the path of physical deviance to lead them to financial and personal freedom.

placed on women’s lives.” See Jennifer Putzi, *Identifying Marks: Race, Gender, and the Marked Body in Nineteenth-Century America* (Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 2006), 155.

²³ Putzi, *Identifying Marks*, 156. For further discussions of feminism and tattooed circus women, see also Braunberger, “Revolting Bodies,” 2000; Pitts, *In the Flesh*, 2003; Thompson, *Covered in Ink*, 2014.

²⁴ Mifflin, *Bodies of Subversion*, 17.

²⁵ Putzi, *Identifying Marks*, 156; Osterud, *The Tattooed Lady*, 10.

²⁶ Aurre, “Meet Betty Broadbent,” *Tattoo Historian*, 21, 40.

²⁷ Charlie Roark interview by Osterud. *The Tattooed Lady*, 112.

²⁸ Adams and Keene, *Women of the American Circus*, 44.

²⁹ Arthur Lewis, *Carnival* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1970), 155-161. See also Mifflin, *Bodies of Subversion*, 22.

³⁰ Parry, *Tattoo*, 64, 76.

Although Broadbent and her contemporaries did not explicitly challenge dominant views of womanhood as innately subservient, domestic, and docile, their steady employment and financial independence destabilized and deviated from the established gender norms. However, these norms dominated tattooing practices outside of the circus and dictated acceptable tattoos for men and women.

Off freak show stages, tattoos remained heavily stigmatized as the practice of criminals and ‘degraded’ sexually-deviant women (read: prostitutes).³¹ Negative connotations of body ink in the public eye influenced tattooing practices and tattoo imagery; images that upheld gender stereotypes enjoyed a level of social acceptance.³² Tattoo wearers typically chose designs that reinforced gendered identities and affirmed their own adherence to these norms.

Men opted for explicit homages to the foundational racial and Christian values of American culture and these images “operated as signs of class-specific, masculine group status.”³³ Common designs on “soldiers, sailors, [and] civilized folk” affirmed heteronormative masculinity and enabled tattoos to permeate American culture.³⁴ For example, an anchor signified a man’s military career, an American flag his patriotism, and female beauties his heterosexuality.³⁵ Generic images, or ‘tattoo flash’, hung on the walls of tattoo shops and remained popular among working-class men and military personnel

³¹ Cesare Lombroso and Guglielmo Ferrero, *Criminal Woman, the Prostitute, and the Normal Woman*, trans. Nicole Hahn Raftar and Mary Gibson, (N.C.: Duke University Press, 2004), 116-120. See also Braunberger, “Revolting Bodies,” 10.

³² The stigmas that shadowed tattoos resulted in part from the pseudo-scientific link between tattoos and degeneracy established by Lombroso in his works *Criminal Man* (1887), *Criminal Woman, the Prostitute, and the Normal Woman* (1895), and *Crime: Its Causes and Remedies* (1899). Lombroso advanced the notion that an individual’s physical traits, such as deformed skulls, sloped foreheads, protruding jaws, and minimal sensitivity to pain, indicated their moral character and deviant personality. Tattoos thus “constituted the exterior sign of inward moral obtuseness” and indicated social danger. See M. Gibson, *Born to Crime: Cesare Lombroso and the Origins of Biological Criminology* (Westport, Connecticut: Praeger Press, 2002), 59. The works of Austrian cultural theorist Adolf Loos and French criminologist Alexandre Lacassagne strengthened Lombroso’s connection between tattoos and delinquency. For reference to “Dr. Lacassagne’s book, *Ornament and Crime*, which was published in 1881,” see George Burchett, *Memoirs of a Tattooist*, ed. Peter Leighton (London: Oldbourne Book Co., 1958), 85.

³³ Pitts, *In the Flesh*, 5.

³⁴ “Tattooing Out of Style,” *The Port Jefferson Echo*, Aug. 28, 1909, 7.

³⁵ Burchett, *Memoirs of a Tattooist*, 37, 86. For further discussion of tattooing practices that supported heteronormative masculinity, see Parry, “Tattooing Among Prostitutes and Perverts,” *The Psychoanalytic Quarterly* 3 (1934), 479; Parry, *Tattoo*, 85-87.

because these images left “no doubt as to one’s masculinity” and affirmed one’s identity as “a red-blooded American man.”³⁶

On the other hand, women applied tattoos as permanent makeup to reinforce beauty norms and invoke “hierarchies of ethnicity, race, economic status” and gender.³⁷ This early twentieth-century tattoo ‘craze’ continued for decades and remained fairly static in both practice and appearance.³⁸ Beauty salons offered ‘cosmetic procedures’ to “add a glow to one’s cheek, an arch to one’s brow, a pout to one’s lips, and for the very brave, the illusion of a few more eyelashes.”³⁹ A 1919 *Los Angeles Herald* article showcased the “professional tattoo man” who guaranteed the “perpetual bloom of youth [and] a rosy complexion.”⁴⁰ Tattooists were “no longer ... satisfied with decorating sailors or prize fighters with ... national emblems” and incorporated permanent makeup in their practices.⁴¹ This source reveals multiple gendered tattoo practices—traditional masculine and patriotic images for men, the male dominance of this practice, and the inclusion of women to the tattoo world under strict pretenses of preserving or enhancing normative beauty.⁴² Archival evidence shows that, although

³⁶ Samuel M. Steward, *Bad Boys and Tough Tattoos: A Social History of the Tattoo with Gangs, Sailors, and Street-Corner Punks 1950-1965* (New York/London: The Haworth Press, 1990), 57; Lyle Tuttle, interview by Fabiani, July 5th, 2016. See also Pitts, *In the Flesh*, 5, Rosemary Gallick, “The Tattoo: An American Pop Art Form,” *The Mid-Atlantic Almanac* 5 (1996): 2.

³⁷ Pitts, *In the Flesh*, 39.

³⁸ “Society’s Tattoo Craze,” *South Side Signal*, pg. 4, Dec. 5, 1908. For more information on this ‘craze’, see “A Tattoo Artist claims he is able to tattoo a permanently rosy complexion on the face of anyone who will pay the price,” *San Francisco Call*, vol. 87, no. 87, Aug. 26, 1902; “Tattooers Turn Beauty Doctors,” *Los Angeles Herald*, no. 303, Oct. 21, 1919; “Girl Creator of Tattoo Fad is in LA,” *Los Angeles Herald*, no. 125, March 26, 1920, 30. It is important to note that the clientele of permanent makeup practices were not exclusively women. Burchett reported occasional instances of men requesting “complexion tattoos” that concealed scars, birthmarks, and black eyes (151-152).

³⁹ Braunberger, “Revolting Bodies,” 4-5.

⁴⁰ “Tattooers Turn Beauty Doctors,” *Los Angeles Herald*, no. 303, Oct. 21, 1919.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² Interestingly, women’s tattooing practices went to “extravagant lengths” to avoid words that evoked negative stigmas. See Braunberger, “Revolting Bodies,” 4. George Burchett, tattooist for over fifty years in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, noted in his autobiography *Memoirs of a Tattooist* (1958) that advertisements for permanent makeup described “medically supervised complexion treatments” that used “a mechanical process” to “improve the epidermis texture” (130-136). Procedures took place in “salons,” where the tattooist “applied permanent, pink blushes to ladies’ cheeks” (131). The “fortunate recipients” of these procedures rarely realized they had been tattooed because society avoided direct

tattoos were markers of deviance, they were tolerated when imagery supported a normative, nationalistic, gendered aesthetic.

Tattooed circus women, like Broadbent, rejected permanent makeup in favor of masculine tattoo imagery and “called attention to the artificiality of gender roles” when they reversed the socially-accepted use of tattoos.⁴³ Broadbent covered her body in ‘all-American’ imagery: famous war generals, presidents, and monuments. In an interview, she exposed the bald eagle soaring in front of an American flag on her chest and described, “I have Lindbergh on the back of my right leg and my back’s covered with a copy of Raphael’s *Madonna and Child*.”⁴⁴ Broadbent and other tattooed circus women chose masculine tattoo designs for their female bodies, which established a common subcultural practice that audiences came to expect.⁴⁵ Parry stated that the designs on tattooed circus acts became so generic that tattooists often re-used stencils on multiple clients or mimicked existing work [Figures 1 and 2].⁴⁶ Circus women inverted social allowances of gendered tattoo imagery, challenged concepts of feminine beauty, and exacerbated tensions in the ambiguous boundaries of gender. However, the images that covered their bodies reinforced foundational American patriotic and religious values, as did the organization of domestic circus life.

references due to negative stereotypes that surrounded tattooed women (139).

⁴³ Thompson, *Covered in Ink*, 39.

⁴⁴ Aurre, “Meet Betty Broadbent,” *Tattoo Historian*, 21.

⁴⁵ Popular culture illuminated the appeal of circus women’s American iconography as a generic element of their trade. A 1939 Groucho Marx song described *Lydia the Tattooed Lady*: “On her back is the Battle of Waterloo/Beside it the Wreck of the Hesperus too/And proudly above waves the Red, White, and Blue.” Groucho Marx, *Lydia the Tattooed Lady*, 1939, qtd. in Braunberger, “Revolting Bodies,” 8. These verses depicted the typical tattooed woman with images of American patriotism and folklore.

⁴⁶ Parry, *Tattoo*, 77.



Figure 1. *Emma de Burgh*. 1880s.
Circus World Museum, Baraboo, WI.
Printed with permission from
Circus World Museum.



Figure 2. *Princess Beatrice*. 1900s.
Circus World Museum, Baraboo, WI.
Printed with permission from
Circus World Museum.

The daily lives of circus employees “did not especially differ from other Americans” at the time, as gender norms regulated their “working class realities.”⁴⁷ Women cooked meals, cleaned, and raised young children, and circus men handled manual labour and public relations. Codes of conduct mandated employee behaviour “in the circus tent, around the lot, and in town” because, according to a Ringling Brothers rule sheet, “we should want the ‘town folks’ to feel that the ‘show folks’ are real ... men and ladies.”⁴⁸ Ventriloquist Charlie Roark recounted the common rules of behavioural contracts: no stealing, no alcohol, and no “loud noise after eleven o’clock.”⁴⁹ Circuses regulated employee behaviour to avoid being run out of town and ensure the financial and professional security of the business. Furthermore, these rules obscured boundaries between circus staff and

⁴⁷ Adams and Keene, *Women of the American Circus*, 69; Osterud, *The Tattooed Lady*, 10, 19.

⁴⁸ Rule Sheet, 1912, Ringling Bros. Vertical File, Circus Women, in Osterud, *The Tattooed Lady*, 76.

⁴⁹ Charlie Roark, interview with author, in Stencell, *Circus and Carnival Ballyhoo*, 37-38. Roark married Broadbent in 1940, with whom he worked, travelled, and raised her young son for over a decade. For further information about their marriage, see Osterud, *The Tattooed Lady*, 112.

average Americans, an ideological link which underscored freak show performances.

Additional behavioural guidelines were applied to women and intended to “protect the girls.”⁵⁰ Roark stated that “they had women-only cars with lady porters worse than a convent ... you couldn’t fraternize.”⁵¹ Circuses hindered sexual promiscuity and reinforced traditional ideals of chastity outside of marriage. Furthermore, employment contracts bound married women to room only with their husbands (if they travelled with the show) and to “not be seen socially in contact with other men.”⁵² These rules ordered domestic life for all circus performers, yet specifically drove women to exude feminine respectability in their stage persona, performance, and physical appearance.

Broadbent juggled the roles of performer, wife, and mother throughout her career and followed many gendered expectations of tattooed circus women. However, the lack of archival evidence prevents a more complete understanding of her personal life and leaves questions about whether her multiple marriages and her child born out of wedlock posed challenges to her employers. Her long and successful career implies that circuses permitted a more flexible domestic code than larger American society.⁵³ Tattooed circus women enjoyed more freedoms than women in the audience, yet remained subject to gendered regulations of feminine behavior and appearance to adhere to employment contracts and enrich their stage acts. Their performances “highlighted their similarities to as well as their differences from” female audience members and shook existing notions about the social roles and functions of American women.⁵⁴ Tattooed women exposed spectators to their self-determining lifestyles and implicitly spurred American women to demand more social independence and freedoms.

Broadbent’s Defiance

Tattooed circus women often emphasized their ‘all-American’ good looks and demure behavior in ways that their employers and audiences expected. Their conventionally-feminine demeanors contrasted their masculine tattoos, and their bodies blurred the boundaries of gender

⁵⁰ Adams and Keene, *Women of the American Circus*, 75.

⁵¹ Interview with Roark, in Stencell, *Circus and Carnival Ballyhoo*, 37.

⁵² Osterud, *The Tattooed Lady*, 75.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 72.

⁵⁴ Putzi, *Identifying Marks*, 154.

norms and seemed to “mock the very concepts of masculinity and femininity.”⁵⁵ The natural beauty of women “mattered in the business of manufactured freaks,” not only for sex appeal but also for relatability to audience members, a link crucial to freak show appeal and supported by formal contracts and informal expectations.⁵⁶ This nuanced relationship of differences and similarities between circus freaks and audiences reinforced “where the ‘real’ boundaries” were.⁵⁷

Archival sources rarely emphasize a tattooed man’s demeanor or physical appearance other than the spectacle of his deviant skin.⁵⁸ However, conventional feminine beauty and behaviour remained a quintessential trait in the stage personas of tattooed circus women. Parry stated that “beautiful and chic ... girls are recruited for the platform” and achieved levels of fame unparalleled by ‘less attractive’ women.⁵⁹ The notoriety of one of the earliest tattooed circus women, Irene Woodward, “was due in part to her good looks.”⁶⁰ Newspaper articles described “La Belle Irene” as a “brown-haired, brown-eyed maiden of about nineteen years of age, of medium-size, of pleasing appearance” and as “a lady of refinement.”⁶¹ Sources from the peak of Broadbent’s popularity, nearly 50 years later, stressed the same characteristics.

Broadbent, “whose beautiful, dimpled smile and bobby socks reminded audience members of the girl next door,” conducted herself both on and off the circus stage as a classy and refined ‘all-American’

⁵⁵ Thompson, *Covered in Ink*, 39.

⁵⁶ Mifflin, *Bodies of Subversion*, 20.

⁵⁷ Braunberger, “Revolting Bodies,” 12.

⁵⁸ Regarding Constantenus, the earliest and most profitable tattooed performer in American history, sources described his tattoo designs at length but rarely mentioned his physical appearance or personal character. An 1877 advertisement highlighted Constantenus as “tattooed from head to foot” but neglected further descriptions. See *The Aggregation*, July 25, 1877. Ethnohistorian Hanns Ebensten detailed the “388 small, delicately etched designs” that “covered every part of [Constantenus’] body” but mentioned no other physical characteristics in *Pierced Hearts and True Love: An Illustrated History of the Origin and Development of European Tattooing and a Survey of its Present State* (London: Derek Verschoyle Ltd., 1953), 17. An 1881 review of Constantenus revealed that he stood “about six feet in his boots” and “had a rather short temper.” See “Farini’s Foreigners,” *Punch, or the London Charivari*, December 3, 1881, Vol. 81, 264, in article “T.A.B.C.,” by C.W. Eldridge, *Tattoo Historian*, March 1983, 8-10. Such descriptions placed little emphasis on physical attraction other than the tattoos on his skin.

⁵⁹ Parry, *Tattoo*, 75-76.

⁶⁰ Mifflin, *Bodies of Subversion*, 20.

⁶¹ “The Tattooed Woman,” *New York Times*, Mar. 19, 1882; “Museum,” *Wichita Eagle*, Dec. 2, 1887, 5. See also Ebensten, *Pierced Hearts and True Love*, 17.

woman.⁶² Her colleagues and employers remembered her as “a young ... pretty girl” and “a lovely lady, with the emphasis on ‘lady’.”⁶³ A 1939 interview with Broadbent observed that “she has nice shoulders *but* there is an American eagle extending from one to the other.”⁶⁴ This observation struggles to reconcile Broadbent’s natural beauty with her deviant appearance and reflects the social tensions produced by an aesthetically-attractive woman encased in a stigmatized body.⁶⁵

Contemporary scholars, including Mifflin, argue that circus performers covered their tattooed skin when offstage as a practical way to “protect their work from the sun’s damaging rays” and “ensure that only paying customers took in the show.”⁶⁶ However, primary sources show that Broadbent and other performers faced negative reactions to their deviant bodies in everyday interactions. A 1939 newspaper article reported that Broadbent “*has* to wear two pairs of stockings whenever she appears in public because of the decorations on her legs.”⁶⁷ Although this source does not specify why Broadbent covered her tattooed skin, it conveys a distinct tone of social mandate.

Stigmas shadowed tattooed bodies and confined them to socially-sanctioned locations, such as circus stages. Freak shows provided spaces that suspended the existing norms and highlighted their fluid boundaries. Performers embodied ‘otherness’ and “what the culture fears most about itself.”⁶⁸ These acts provided “an unstructured

⁶² Osterud, *The Tattooed Lady*, 113.

⁶³ Leonard St. Clair and Alan B. Govenar, *Stoney Knows How: Life as a Tattoo Artist* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1982), 145; Ward Hall interviewed by Osterud. *The Tattooed Lady*, 113.

⁶⁴ Interview with Broadbent, *Hamilton County Record*. July 27, 1939, 2. Italics my own.

⁶⁵ Other physically deviant circus women who blurred the conventional boundaries between genders, such as bearded ladies, also upheld behavioural standards of respectable femininity. See Sean Trainor, “Fair Bosom/Black Beard: Facial Hair, Gender Determination, and the Strange Career of Madame Clouffia, ‘Bearded Lady,’” *Early American Studies* 12, no.3 (2014).

⁶⁶ Mifflin, *Bodies of Subversion*, 23.

⁶⁷ Interview with Broadbent, *Hamilton County Record*, 2. Italics my own.

⁶⁸ Shirley Peterson, “Freaking Feminism: *The Life and Loves of a She-Devil* and *Nights at the Circus* as Narrative Freak Shows,” in *Freakery: Cultural Spectacles of the Extraordinary Body*, ed. Rosemarie Garland Thomson, (New York: New York University Press, 1996), 291. See also Leslie Fiedler, *Freaks: Myths and Images of the Secret Self* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1978), 25-27. For further discussion of “the Other...as a mirror for the white, Western self, through which we can see ourselves, imagine ourselves differently, critique our social problems, or adorn ourselves in identities that satisfyingly contrast with and compliment our own,” see Pitts, *In the Flesh*, 149.

testing ground” where cultural tensions bound by binary categories—male/female, beautiful/grotesque, normal/abnormal—were “explored in a controlled way.”⁶⁹ The display of these bodies in sanctioned spaces “soothe[d] the onlookers’ self-doubt by appearing as their antithesis.”⁷⁰ Freak shows were removed from, yet intrinsically bound to, processes of daily life and provided spaces that perpetuated “an internal, articulated, and detailed control.”⁷¹ Hegemonic social structures targeted abnormal bodies for governance and rendered deviance “safely domesticated and bound by the [freak] show’s forms and conventions.”⁷² Circuses made these bodies visible to the society that banned them from normative public life.⁷³ The “total authority” of “certain social groups” reinforced power structures in ways that appeared “both legitimate and natural.”⁷⁴

The anonymity of fully-clothed tattooed performers enhanced their appeal because they could easily blend into normative American society. Inconspicuousness meant that onstage “they could be the type of women your mother warned you about but offstage they could be everywhere.”⁷⁵ Broadbent pinpointed the climax of her performance to her transformation from visibly normal to deviant:

In the summer I wore a floor-length satin robe and in the winter a velvet one. The platform lecturer would announce, “And now, ladies and gentlemen, the lady who’s different!” Up ‘till then, nobody had the slightest idea what was different about me. I’d unzip my robe and I’d be wearing a costume underneath.⁷⁶

⁶⁹ Marvin Carlson, *Performance: A Critical Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 23. See also Atkinson, *Tattooed*, 36.

⁷⁰ Rosemarie Garland Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 65.

⁷¹ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan, (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1979), 72.

⁷² Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies*, 65.

⁷³ Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 72.

⁷⁴ Hebdige, *Subculture*, 16. Interestingly, the classification of space within the circus “inverts the class distinctions of the outside world” because “the outcast freak show performers and carnival workers controlled who was allowed to enter what spaces and under what conditions.” See Fenske, *Tattoos in American Visual Culture*, 67. Spatial power shifted to those ostracized to the margins of polite society and permitted avenues of agency.

⁷⁵ Braunberger, “Revolting Bodies,” 12.

⁷⁶ Aurre, “Meet Betty Broadbent,” *Tattoo Historian*, 21.

Only her undoubtedly skimpy costume exposed her tattooed skin as markedly different from the crowd.⁷⁷

Tattooed bodies traversed social boundaries in ways other circus freaks could not. Performers rarely appeared in public with uncovered tattoos because of the negative connotations linked to their physical appearance. However, Broadbent broke from the boundaries of the freak show stage and thus from another common practice of her subculture when she appeared in the world's first televised beauty contest at the 1939 World's Fair in New York City. With this defiant act, she challenged ideals of gender, femininity, and beauty in an unconventional space.

It is unclear whether Broadbent knew "as a tattooed contestant she had no chance of winning" or if she entered the contest simply to capitalize on the free publicity.⁷⁸ Regardless of motive, this action subversively defied existing feminine standards in a space meant to celebrate them and illuminated how the meanings of tattooed bodies changed based on the spaces in which they performed. Beauty contests "showcased values, concepts, and behaviour" central to American normativity and provided an antithesis to the freak show stage.⁷⁹ Broadbent presented herself as she did in her circus performances—conventional hair and makeup and a long cape that concealed a tiny outfit—but the movement of her tattooed body from freak show to beauty contest stage conveyed different meanings. She transformed from "spectacle" to "monstrosity" as she elided "the gap between

⁷⁷ Tattooed performances in the 1920s and 1930s echoed those of Constantenus, who began his act fully clothed and removed his clothes until "the grand reveal" of his tattooed body. See Robert Sherwood, *Here We Are Again: Recollections of an Old Circus Clown* (Indianapolis, IN: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1926), 151.

⁷⁸ Mifflin, *Bodies of Subversion*, 25.

⁷⁹ Colleen Cohen, Richard Wilk, Beverly Stoeltje, eds., *Beauty Queens on a Global Stage* (New York, Routledge, 1996), 2. Braunberger points out that P.T. Barnum held credit for the introduction of beauty contests to America. In 1854, he suggested that "women take the stage so that their beauty may be judged." Newspapers quickly picked up these stories and "thus began the public warming to this form of scrutinized beauty." The introduction of beauty contests to American culture contributed "to the shift in the general public's perception of women as commodity images without women directly participating." By 1880, a Miss U.S.A. contest existed and by 1920, the Miss America contest was "designed to publicize resort areas." See Braunberger, "Revolting Bodies," 9-11. Moral codes of conduct still apply to beauty pageant participants to ensure their conformance to national values of gender. See official rules at www.missamerica.org.

beauty pageant and freak show” and became “two Barnum acts in one.”⁸⁰

A photograph of Broadbent at this contest reveals the sharp contrast between her appearance and the appearance of the other contestants [Figure 3]. This photograph may appear as an innocent moment from the contest, but we can extract the cultural discourses that flow through an image by analyzing the photograph’s angle, focus, and frame.⁸¹ I apply mainstream theories of photograph interpretation, which dictate that visual materials require an evaluation of the context, or the “cultural and historical forces circulating through a specific image,” to uncover embedded messages.⁸²



Figure 3. *Tattooed Lady with Cape*. 1939. The New York Public Library Digital Collections. Manuscripts and Archives Division. Accessed 3 April 2016. <http://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/5e66b3e8-866b-d471-e040-e00a180654d7>.

⁸⁰ Braunberger, “Revolting Bodies,” 13.

⁸¹ Terry Barrett, *Criticizing Photographs: An Introduction to Understanding Images* (California: Mayfield Publishing Co., 1990), 35; Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 31-36.

⁸² Fenske, *Tattoos in American Visual Culture*, 2. See also Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), 17-26.

In the photograph, Broadbent stands proudly onstage after she opened a long cape to reveal her short dress and tattooed skin. Rather than capture her in isolation, the photographer highlighted Broadbent's contrast to the other participants, visible behind her and in an elevated position in the frame. Interestingly, photographs of the other participants at this beauty contest do not include rich background activity, but instead position each woman alone in front of a blank wall [Figure 4]. Whether consciously or not, the photographer captured moments that highlighted Broadbent's deviance—her revealing clothing, her tattooed skin, her difference from conventional beauty.



Figure 4. *Television Girl*. 1939. The New York Public Library Digital Collections. Manuscripts and Archives Division. Accessed 3 April 2016. <http://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/5e66b3e8-de05-d471-e040-e00a180654d7>.

Although she did not win the Fairest of the Fair crown, Broadbent's appearance on this stage challenged the social expectations and restrictions placed on both tattooed and non-tattooed American women. She shook ideals of feminine beauty when she defied the traditional relegation of tattooed circus women to the freak

show stage, a bold move that further distinguished her from other women in this subculture.

Tattooed circus performers appeared almost naked onstage, but women's exposure was charged with an undeniable sexual energy absent from men's performances. Men's heavily-tattooed skin was the main spectacle of their performances—they “merely had to sit or stand nearly nude upon the stage” as audiences inspected them.⁸³ Women, on the other hand, “had to perform” rather than “sit or stand idly and draw the stares of admission-payers.”⁸⁴ The scanty outfits and “sheer amount of the female body exposed ... titillated male audiences” and established women's performances as “the most frequented and profitable shows on the midway.”⁸⁵ Their bare flesh “trounced upon Victorian limits of what was deemed acceptable for women” and “brought a sexual allure to the sideshow that a tattooed man never could.”⁸⁶ Parry stated that young and pretty tattooed circus women gained “a better box-office” and “healthier receipts” than men because their performances were “heavily and frankly tinged with the sex motive.”⁸⁷

Progressively shorter costumes reflected the changing “desire of the crowd to see the highly sexualized woman” that imposed greater demands on female performers' bodies.⁸⁸ Over the course of Broadbent's career, higher hemlines “forced [her] to tattoo her upper thighs, an area she had previously concealed with a skirt.”⁸⁹ Broadbent reflected that by the time she retired in 1967, “you had to wear little or nothing to attract any attention.”⁹⁰ Tattooed circus women chose their own costumes but the evolution of their outfits and sexualized

⁸³ Mindy Fenske, “Movement and Resistance: (Tattooed) Bodies and Performance,” *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 4, no. 1 (2007), 61. See also Robert Bogdan, *Freak Show: Presenting Human Oddities for Amusement and Profit* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 104-110, 247. Circus clown Robert Sherwood expressed sympathy for a tattooed male colleague, who had to “strip a dozen times a day to semi-nakedness” in cold temperatures “under a wet circus top in the early spring.” See Sherwood, *Here We Are Again*, 151.

⁸⁴ Parry, *Tattoo*, 65.

⁸⁵ Michael Atkinson, *Tattooed: The Sociogenesis of a Body Art* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003), 35.

⁸⁶ Klem, “A Life of Her Own Choosing,” 34. See also Mifflin, *Bodies of Subversion*, 77; DeMello, *Encyclopedia*, 261; Fenske, “Movement and Resistance,” 61.

⁸⁷ Parry, *Tattoo*, 73-75. See also Braunberger, “Revolting Bodies,” 12; Atkinson, *Tattooed*, 35.

⁸⁸ Adams and Keene, *Women of the American Circus*, 85.

⁸⁹ Mifflin, *Bodies of Subversion*, 27.

⁹⁰ Aurre, “Meet Betty Broadbent,” *Tattoo Historian*, 40.

performances demonstrates that they reacted to “the pressure of employers and audiences” to maintain profits and large paychecks.⁹¹

Revealing costumes contrasted with their respectable feminine behaviour and linked these women to prostitutes and nude dancers because their “exposed bodies were purchasable commodities.”⁹² Tattooed circus women became “eroticized on the stage” as a “unique version of a peep show.”⁹³ The amount of skin revealed “would have been lewd if not illegal” under other circumstances and allowed “showmen a way of sliding a little bawdiness into the freak show tent.”⁹⁴ Many tattooed women “used their sexuality to sell tickets” and removed layers of costume in an overtly sexual “semi-strip tease” that added “a libidinal element to the veritable peep show.”⁹⁵

Freak shows provided legitimate spaces to sexually objectify women. Late-night circus “girlie shows” or “hooch shows” explicitly identified a sexualized woman as the main attraction, but the performances of tattooed women kept sex appeal implicit.⁹⁶ Exposure of tattooed women’s bodies channeled peep shows and conveyed messages of sexual deviance absent from the performances of their male counterparts.

⁹¹ Adams and Keene, *Women of the American Circus*, 85.

⁹² Fenske, *Tattoos in American Visual Culture*, 97.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 97.

⁹⁴ Bogdan, *Freak Show*, 251.

⁹⁵ DeMello, *Encyclopedia*, 645; Mifflin, *Bodies of Subversion*, 21. See also Atkinson, *Tattooed*, 35.

⁹⁶ Adams and Keene, *Women of the American Circus*, 121. See also Stencell, *Circus and Carnival Ballyhoo*, 65-68, for further information on hooch shows. He stated that “the cooch dance in the sideshow blow-offs [unmarked tents located behind circus grounds] was usually short and sweet. Male patrons sometimes saw total nudity but often just quick flashes of bare female flesh before the lecturer or the lone musician hollered, ‘It’s all out and over, gentlemen!’” (66).



Figure 5. *Tattooed Lady and Sailor*. 1939. The New York Public Library Digital Collections. Manuscripts and Archives Division. Accessed 3 April 2016. <http://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/5e66b3e8-f5d9-d471-e040-e00a180654d7>.

Though Broadbent contributed to the discursive production of deviant bodies, she also exercised agency in ways atypical of other tattooed circus women. A candid photograph of Broadbent at the 1939 *Strange As It Seems* exhibition at the World's Fair shows her smiling at a sailor (himself with a visible patriotic tattoo) as she lifts the hem of her dress to further expose her legs [Figure 5]. The exact context of this photograph, taken by the Fair's press for its annual review, remains unclear. It may capture an onstage comparison of tattooed bodies: the stereotypically-tattooed male sailor upstaged by a more heavily- and patriotically-tattooed circus woman. Audiences accepted both figures—a tattooed serviceman and a beautiful woman—but Broadbent combined elements of both and became deviant, exposing tensions in the gender binary. This photograph may also capture the common freak

show practice of inviting skeptical audience members to the stage to authenticate a performer.⁹⁷ Regardless, this moment reveals sexual objectification as the lived reality of a tattooed circus woman. Promotional circus materials featured female performers in low-cut shirts, short skirts, and sexualized poses, “staged in a highly ... elaborated form with a set of rules articulated by the conventions of display.”⁹⁸ Postcards of Broadbent sold at her performances captured her with a lifted skirt in positions reminiscent of traditional pin-up model poses [Figure 6].⁹⁹



Figure 6. *Betty Broadbent*. 1930s. The New York Public Library Digital Collections. Billy Rose Theatre Division. Accessed 3 April 2016. <http://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/510d47d9-e973-a3d9-e040-e00a18064a99>.

⁹⁷ Mifflin, *Bodies of Subversion*, 14.

⁹⁸ Fenske, *Tattoos in American Visual Culture*, 97. See also Richard Bauman, “Performance,” in *Folklore, Cultural Performances, and Popular Entertainment*, ed. Richard Bauman (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 46.

⁹⁹ Images of sexualized women in provocative poses, popular in the first half of the twentieth century, were frequently cut from magazines, newspapers and postcards and pinned up on walls in male-dominated spaces (frequently military bases, barber shops, and taverns). For further discussion of pin-up girls, see Joanne Meyerowitz, “Women, Cheesecake, and Borderline Material,” *Journal of Women’s History* 8, no.3 (1996): 9-35.

Broadbent accepted the necessity of near nudity for her circus performances but refused to capitalize on her sexuality, a common practice of other tattooed circus women. She maintained her performance as a “respectable” act, which differentiated her from “those carnival floozies with one or two tattoos who would bump and grind.”¹⁰⁰ She shamed her contemporaries because they showcased their sex appeal as the main spectacle rather than their tattooed skin. When the Ringling Brothers management gave her the sexually-laden moniker “Tattooed Venus” on show bills, Broadbent protested directly to her employers and introduced herself to her audiences by her first name.¹⁰¹ In the photograph with the sailor, Broadbent lifted her dress but stood slightly stooped, which implies that this extra exposure of her upper thighs was brief before she dropped her hem. Broadbent exposed unconventional amounts of skin for her circus career but resisted sexual objectification by employers and audiences. She presented her tattooed body as beautiful and lady-like and, unlike the other women in this subculture, rarely positioned herself as an object of sexual desire. Nor did she portray herself as an object of pity, another common practice of tattooed performers. Broadbent refused the traditional ‘tall tales’ told by her contemporaries to shirk their own involvement in their appearances and instead took full responsibility for her tattooed skin.

Early twentieth-century tattooed circus performers used stories of “capture, torture, tattooing, and dramatic escape” from groups of “savages” to explain their inked bodies.¹⁰² Captivity narratives shielded performers “from taking responsibility for their condition” because they cast themselves as victims of racial violence.¹⁰³ This transference of power provided “the crucial element in these stories” and rendered tattooed bodies “acceptable in the eyes of the audience.”¹⁰⁴ Tattooed circus performers harnessed gender and racial anxieties and shaped

¹⁰⁰ Aurre, “Meet Betty Broadbent,” *Tattoo Historian*, 21.

¹⁰¹ Interview with Roark, in Osterud, *The Tattooed Lady*, 112.

¹⁰² Atkinson, *Tattooed*, 34. See also DeMello, *Encyclopedia*, 260. Interestingly, sex workers in early American culture also used captivity narratives. Brothels provided performance space for prostitutes to account for their entrance into this deviant career, likewise removing themselves of responsibility for their actions. See Anna Tinnemeyer, *Identity Politics of the Captivity Narrative after 1948* (Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 2006), 21-23.

¹⁰³ Thompson, *Covered in Ink*, 177.

¹⁰⁴ Braunberger, “Revolting Bodies,” 9. See also Adams and Keene, *Women of the American Circus*, 141; Osterud, *The Tattooed Lady*, 52.

their texts in “constant awareness of the audience.”¹⁰⁵ Men and women both used captivity narratives to invoke contextual tensions, but women’s tales insinuated sexual violation.



Figure 7. *Olive Oatman with Tattoos on Chin*. 1858. The New York Public Library Digital Collections. General Research Division. Accessed 3 April 2016. <http://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/b5e264bc-513b-4b69-e040-e00a18060150>.

Captivity narratives painted a fearful image of an ‘all-American’ girl robbed of her dignity and agency by ‘racial inferiors.’ Tattooed women’s tales drew power from allusions to forced slavery, racial violence, and sexual assault that resonated in American cultural memory. The tales of tattooed circus women in the 1920s and 1930s “were granddaughters in spirit” to the seventeenth-century autobiography of Mary Rowlandson, a Massachusetts pioneer kidnapped and held hostage by the Nashaway tribe, and the 1857 story of Olive Oatman, a young girl kidnapped and forcibly tattooed on her face by the Mohave tribe [Figure 7].¹⁰⁶ The Turkish-Armenian War of

¹⁰⁵ Putzi, *Identifying Marks*, 16.

¹⁰⁶ Mary Kosut, “Tattoo Narratives: The Intersection of the Body, Self-Identity and Society,” *Visual Sociology* 15, no.1 (2000): 80. For Rowlandson’s story, see Mary Rowlandson, *The Sovereignty and Goodness of God: Being a Narrative of the Captivity and Restoration of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson*, ed. Neal Salisbury (Boston: Bedford-St. Martin’s, 1997, original 1682). For Oatman’s story, see Royal B. Stratton, *Captivity of the Oatman Girls*, 2nd ed. (San Francisco: Whitton & Towne, 1857). After Oatman escaped, her story became an American legend and Pastor Stratton published a sensationally-written account of her harrowing experience that

1920 rehashed connections between tattooed women and forced slavery. American newspapers reported extensively on this conflict and sensationalized photographs of Christian Armenian women tattooed with the “mark of a slave” on their hands, breasts, and faces.¹⁰⁷ These histories served as prototypes “for the stylized life-stories” of tattooed women and origin tales in freak shows recycled common tropes.¹⁰⁸

Captivity narratives “catered to prevailing fantasies that supported colonial and genocidal efforts” because they featured “savage interlopers” who “preyed on ‘delicate pioneer women’.”¹⁰⁹ They contained weighted words, such as ‘violation’ and ‘indignity,’ that delivered messages of sexual defilement and “tattoo rape.”¹¹⁰ These tales enabled circus performers to negate earlier connotations of tattooed women as sexual deviants.¹¹¹ They renounced responsibility for their tattoos and reinscribed themselves as “good girls.”¹¹² Tattooed circus women “emphasized their chastity, femininity, and vulnerability” and scripted narratives which exploited the “horrifying possibility of the white body being permanently marked by an indigenous culture.”¹¹³ Existing racial prejudices encouraged audiences to overlook obvious contradictions, such as their American and

sold over 30,000 copies in the first year. For more information on Oatman, see Edward J. Pettid, “Olive Ann Oatman’s Lecture Notes and the Oatman Bibliography,” *San Bernardino Museum Association Quarterly* 16 (Winter 1968): 19; Putzi, *Identifying Marks*, 28-48; Stephan Oettermann, “On Display: Tattooed Entertainers in America and Germany,” in *Written on the Body: The Tattoo in European and American History*, ed. Jane Caplan (London: Reaktion Books, 2000), 200-201; Thompson, *Covered in Ink*, 23-24; Mifflin, *Bodies of Subversion*, 16-18.

¹⁰⁷ “Harem Victim Tells Story,” *Marin Journal*, 57, no. 48 (November 25, 1920). See also “No Smile Comes into the Eyes of Slave Girl,” *Sacramento Union*, No. 4 (January 4, 1920); “Armenian Girl Pleads for Sisters,” *Marin Journal*, vol. 60, no. 1 (January 3, 1920); “Cure for Tattooing is Sought: Need of Thousands of Turk-Disfigured Armenian Women has Aroused Medics,” *Winona Republican-Herald*, (December 13, 1919).

¹⁰⁸ Oettermann, “On Display,” 201-202. The Indian Citizenship Act of 1924, which established all Native Americans as full US citizens, diminished the legal gap between white Americans and non-white indigenous groups. These heightened anxieties that surrounded race and gender in the 1920s and 1930s explained the continued allure of captivity narratives to American audiences.

¹⁰⁹ Braunberger, “Revolted Bodies,” 9-10.

¹¹⁰ Osterud, *The Tattooed Lady*, 53; Braunberger, “Revolted Bodies,” 19. See also Klem, “A Life of Her Own Choosing,” 34.

¹¹¹ See Lombroso, *Criminal Woman*, 1893 (2004); Parry, “Tattooing Among Prostitutes,” 1934.

¹¹² Braunberger, “Revolted Bodies,” 10.

¹¹³ Putzi, *Identifying Marks*, 16. See also DeMello, *Encyclopedia*, 645-646.

Christian tattoo imagery, because captivity narratives demonized Native Americans and reassured audiences of their own “self-worth and the civility of urban life.”¹¹⁴

Broadbent rejected the common subcultural practice of racially-charged tattoo origin stories. She declined to position herself as a helpless victim and instead took full credit for her appearance. Although no full record of her stage script exists, newspaper articles shed light on the details of her performances and imply that Broadbent told a factual, albeit romanticized, tale of leaving home at a young age to pursue a life of wealth, travel, and adventure.¹¹⁵ Modern scholars of tattooed circus women consistently overlook Broadbent as an example of resistance to this common and expected performative element. She challenged existing hegemonic ideologies of gender and race in ways that other tattooed circus women did not when she refused to employ captivity narratives; yet another example of how Broadbent broke from the mold of this subculture and shattered contemporary generalizations.

Final Thoughts

By and large, scholars of early twentieth-century tattooed circus women pay little attention to instances of difference and instead focus on similarities to construct a homogenous subculture. Women in this career highlighted the ambiguity of gender norms but also remained subject to these ideals by the implicit and explicit rules of their profession. Generally, tattooed circus women were financially independent, conventionally beautiful, and conveyed ‘respectable’ and ‘lady-like’ behaviour both on and off the freak show stage. They inverted social tolerances of tattoos by covering their female bodies with ‘all-American’ imagery that traditionally signified

¹¹⁴ Andrea Stulman Dennet, *Weird and Wonderful: The Dime Museum in America* (NY: New York University Press, 1997), 7. Importantly, circus freak shows often featured displays of ‘wild men’ or ‘savages’ that reinforced racial stereotypes and prominent notions of white civility and superiority. In these acts, performers acted in “exaggerated stereotypic ways” and would “grunt or pace the stage, snarling and growling,” dressed in a loincloth and perhaps “a string of bones around the neck.” See Bogdan, “The Social Construction of Freaks,” 28. Cassuto discusses the “standard practice to exhibit non-Westerners in freak shows as primitive humans or ‘missing links’” in displays of “the racial freak.” See Cassuto, “Tattooing and the Racial Freak,” 241-245. See also Bogdan, *Freak Show*, 104-106; Stencell, *Circus and Carnival Ballyhoo*, 29-35. Such displays situated white society as the apex of human civilization and progress.

¹¹⁵ Interview with Broadbent, *Hamilton County Record*, 2.

heteronormative masculinity. These women remained visible only on freak show stages, which were socially-sanctioned spaces that tolerated and even celebrated deviant bodies. They also used captivity narratives that drew power from contextual tensions to deflect accountability for their tattooed skin.

Broadbent shared commonalities with the women in her subculture, but she also differed in ways that make her historically unique. She accepted the professional requirement to display an unconventional amount of skin but resisted sexual exploitation and struggled to keep her tattooed skin the main spectacle. She further differentiated herself from other tattooed circus women by competing in the 1939 World's Fair beauty contest. By doing so, she blurred boundaries between 'normal' and 'abnormal' beauty as well as legitimate and illegitimate spaces for the display of deviant bodies. She also rejected tales of captivity and presented her body as the product of her own choices rather than the result of violation, victimization, and lack of power. Broadbent challenged ideals of gender roles, femininity, and physical beauty in ways that other tattooed circus women did not and she thus complicates modern generalizations of this subculture.

Following the Second World War, tattooed bodies no longer drew large circus crowds.¹¹⁶ Hard economic times and competition from movies diminished the popularity of freak shows.¹¹⁷ Since Broadbent's retirement in 1967, the presence of tattooed women outside of circuses has been progressively normalized. Today, no expectations for an elaborate origin story exist when American women ink their bodies.¹¹⁸ Instead, women choose images that convey personal meanings often associated with individuality and triumph over trauma. However, gendered practices in the imagery, size, and location of tattoos endure. Today, women normally opt for small, brightly-coloured images linked to delicacy and natural beauty, such as flowers, birds, and butterflies, and place their tattoos in discreet locations, such as the lower back, shoulders, and bikini lines.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁶ Even before the war, primary sources reveal that "a tattooed arm is no longer a curiosity" because of the oversaturation of this circus profession. "Tattooing Decline," *WRH*, Sept. 2, 1936, 6. See also Marcia Tucker, "Pssst! Wanna See My Tattoo..." *Ms.*, April 1976, 31-33.

¹¹⁷ Bogdan, "The Social Construction of Freaks," 23.

¹¹⁸ Mifflin, *Bodies of Subversion*, 102.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 104. Men continue to favour large images that attest to their normative masculinity, such as traditional patriotic and religious iconography, and tend to place their tattoos in highly visible locations, such as arms, hands, or neck. See Thompson, *Covered in Ink*, 159.

The sexualization of tattooed women likewise persists today. Tattoo magazine covers overwhelmingly feature women “as scantily-clad sex objects” and focus on their nearly-nude bodies rather than their tattoos.¹²⁰ Women appear without shirts and cover their breasts with their hands, despite an absence of tattoos on their torsos to necessitate toplessness. On the other hand, men stand in strong postures and use women as their heteronormative “sexual decoration,” which displays tattooed men as “active [and] serious” in their appearances.¹²¹

Tattooed women’s objectification occurs most overtly at body modification conventions, which often feature tattoo contests. In these “premier events,” tattooed bodies parade onstage in front of large audiences and a judging panel “composed of prominent tattoo artists.”¹²² Stylistic, technical, and aesthetic elements of a tattoo decide the winner, and the tattooist and model receive prizes and magazine features.¹²³ These contests explicitly celebrate the craft of tattooing. However, votes typically favor “the sexiest body rather than the most beautiful artwork” and emphasize a women’s physical desirability in conjunction with her tattoos.¹²⁴ These competitions offer spaces that combine elements of beauty contests and freak shows and reinforce gender norms because “tattooed women are expected to maintain their bodies within larger social codes of size and shape.”¹²⁵

The meanings of women’s tattooed bodies have transformed throughout the twentieth century, but stigmas and stereotypes survive today. Broadbent’s subversive actions accelerated transformations in the public’s perception of tattooed women more drastically than her contemporaries. However, the progression of tattoos from a deviant to an acceptable, even celebrated, social practice is far from over and may only be successful when tattoo wearers challenge ideals of sex, beauty, and space with the same fervor and bravery as Betty Broadbent.

¹²⁰ Thompson, *Covered in Ink*, 148.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*

¹²² Fenske, *Tattoos in American Visual Culture*, 43.

¹²³ DeMello, *Bodies of Inscription*, 29; Mifflin, *Bodies of Subversion*, 49.

¹²⁴ Interview with Patricia Ball, “Living as a Work of Art,” *Free Lance Star*, Aug. 11, 1990: 4.

¹²⁵ Braunberger, “Revoluting Bodies,” 16-17.

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- Figure 1. *Emma de Burgh*. 1880s. Circus World Museum, Baraboo, Wisconsin. Printed with permission from Circus World Museum.
- Figure 2. *Princess Beatrice*. 1900s. Circus World Museum, Baraboo, Wisconsin. Printed with permission from Circus World Museum.

- Figure 3. *Tattooed Lady with Cape*. 1939. The New York Public Library Digital Collections. Manuscripts and Archives Division. Accessed 3 April 2016. <http://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/5e66b3e8-866b-d471-e040-e00a180654d7>.
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- Figure 5. *Tattooed Lady and Sailor*. 1939. The New York Public Library Digital Collections. Manuscripts and Archives Division. Accessed 3 April 2016. <http://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/5e66b3e8-f5d9-d471-e040-e00a180654d7>.
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- Figure 7. *Olive Oatman with Tattoos on Chin*. 1858. The New York Public Library Digital Collections. General Research Division. Accessed 3 April 2016. <http://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/b5e264bc-513b-4b69-e040-e00a18060150>.

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