

James O’Connell was an Irish convict who was sent to the British colony of Australia in 1826. After several years in Australia, O’Connell made his way to the Carolina Islands in the South Pacific in the late 1820’s. The sailor subsequently lived on the island of Pohnpei for roughly seven years as an adopted member of the native population. During his time on Pohnpei, O’Connell was tattooed in the Pohnpeian tradition.¹ Sometime during the early 1830s, O’Connell made his way onto an American schooner named *The Spy of Salem*. In 1835, O’Connell immigrated to the United States of America, and in 1836 the sailor published an account of his time in Australia and the island of Pohnpei, entitled *A Residence of Eleven Years in New Holland*.² Also in 1836, O’Connell began performing in New York City as a sideshow performer. These are the only indisputable facts regarding the events that led up to O’Connell entering the entertainment business. Many of the events in O’Connell’s narrative have since been called into question, but the importance of this enigmatic figure lies in the narrative he would push as a performer in the public entertainment business.³ An inspection of O’Connell’s narrative provides invaluable insight into the content of his spectacle during the early years of his career.

O’Connell’s “Tattooed Man” sideshow consisted of the ex-sailor taking the stage, dancing an Irish jig, and then telling the audience of his experiences in the South Pacific.⁴ Using his narrative as a guide, one can basically guess what O’Connell told his audience. According to

¹ Gell and Denning

²As a historical document, this narrative must be taken with a grain of salt. The book is written only from O’Connell’s point of view which detracts from the authority of the document as the sailor was giving an account of his time among a people that he did not understand. In 1972 anthropologist Saul Riesenber published an edited version of O’Connell’s account which calls into question many of the events discussed in O’Connell’s original work. CITE BOOK

³ Saul Reisenberg

⁴ O’Connell actually spent time in the West Pacific in Micronesia. This nuance, however, was not important to nineteenth-century entertainers, so he simply told audiences that he had spent time in the South Pacific; an area of the world that had become exceedingly interesting to Western peoples after the “discovery” of New Zealand, Tahiti, Tonga, and other islands by the English explorer James Cook in 1768.

his narrative, he and his crew were on their way to Japan for trading purposes by way of the South Pacific when they were shipwrecked on the island of Pohnpei around the year 1826.⁵ Upon landing in Pohnpei, O'Connell and his surviving shipmates were quickly approached by a group of Pohnpeian natives. According to O'Connell, his shipmates had "feared the Indians were cannibals," (they weren't) but O'Connell himself had enough experience with native cultures in the surrounding islands that he could tell that "they intended us [sailors] no harm."⁶ O'Connell states that upon making this assumption he "was brave and chose to meet the natives while dancing an Irish Jig for their entertainment."⁷ This, apparently, delighted the natives so much that they brought O'Connell and his shipmate George Keenan with them to their village, and then proceeded to tattoo the two men.⁸ Although O'Connell suggests that his tattooing was against his will, he states that he accepted his fate "like a martyr."⁹ On the other hand, his shipmate Keenan "swore and raved," when receiving his tattoo, which caused the Native women to mimic and mock him later.¹⁰ Though the sailors found the tattooing to be unpleasant, O'Connell states that the Pohnpeians "continued to treat us with great hospitality and kindness."¹¹ O'Connell claimed that his tattooing was a sort of marriage ceremony, and, due to his courage and bravery during the tattooing, he was given the chief's favorite daughter to marry. Keenan was wedded to a wife of "no rank" because of his "unwillingness to submit to the tattooing."¹² O'Connell's narrative goes on to describe his life among the Pohnpeians, including

⁵ James O'Connell. *The Life and Adventures of James F. O'Connell, The Tattooed Man*. New York, NY: W. Applegate, 1845. p. 11

⁶ Ibid

⁷ Ibid

⁸ Ibid p. 12: For further reading regarding tattooing traditions of South Pacific Islanders, see GELL AND DENNING

⁹ O'Connell p. 12

¹⁰ Ibid

¹¹ Ibid

¹² Ibid p. 14

his marriage and the birth of two children. According to O'Connell's memoir, the two sailors were saved after noticing, and subsequently boarding, an American vessel, never to return to the island.¹³

O'Connell's narrative provides a baseline for our understanding of the story he would tell during his time as a performer, but the document is noticeably hyperbolic and contradictory with regard to his discussions of native peoples. In his narrative, the Pohnpeian people were encapsulated by his dancing, he is married to an island "princess," he goes on adventures, and makes a heroic escape. These features of the narrative were likely invented to make his story more dramatic. However, it is exceptionally important to note the contradictory ways that he discusses the native peoples he came across during his time in the South Pacific. For example, early in the narrative O'Connell discusses his time in New Holland (Australia), and he describes the native peoples as "the connecting link between apes and men...and, particularly when old, resemble the monkey more than any other human beings do."⁸² Further, O'Connell consistently remarks on the native people's lack of "civilization." The sailor's consistent remarks about the "uncivilized savages" effectively serves to dehumanize the native peoples, however, when discussing his time in Pohnpei, O'Connell states, "after George and I had become habituated to their customs, and learned to appreciate their character, we resigned ourselves to circumstances, and were content in the absence of almost all hope of escape, to be happy." O'Connell goes on to state "Some people claiming to be civilized might take a lesson from the humanity of these people to shipwrecked mariners."¹⁴ O'Connell's narrative presents the natives as uncivilized and inhumane, but then makes statements like this which directly

¹³ O'Connell p. 26

¹⁴ *A Residence of Eleven Years in New Holland and the Caroline Islands*. B. B. Mussey; Boston; 1836. p.109. This quote comes from the original source of O'Connell's story. It was, notably, omitted from the shorter version in 1845.

acknowledge the civilized and humane treatment that he and his shipmate received while living among the Pohnpeians. Thus, O'Connell's narrative presents the reader with a complex, nuanced, and sometimes contradictory account of a white man's experience in a foreign land.

When O'Connell began performing his spectacle in New York City in 1836, it is fair to assume that some of the nuance found in his published work was still a part of his story, though the media quickly dramatized and exaggerated his already exaggerated tale. For example, in 1836, the *Boston Galaxy* published an article about O'Connell's experience, entitled "Adventures on the South Seas," which gave details about the Irishman's time among the Pohnpeians. The article begins by prefacing O'Connell's experience, claiming that the sailor had been "shipwrecked and made captive."¹⁵ Captivity was never mentioned by O'Connell directly. The sailor's only reference to a captive status is in one statement where he calls the Pohnpeian Chief "my new friend-or master, or owner – I do not know how exactly he considered himself."¹⁶ The *Galaxy* article goes on to state, "he [O'Connell] was seized, with such of his companions that survived the wreck, by the Islanders, and all expected to be immediately slain. O'Connell, in this dilemma...commenced an Irish dance, which amused the people mightily. He, thus, saved himself and his friends."¹⁷ This depiction of O'Connell's experience was clearly included to inspire a sense of danger and drama, but in his narrative O'Connell states that he knew the Pohnpeians "meant us no harm."¹⁸ Here, from the outset of O'Connell's story being told to the public, the events were dramatized to create a dichotomous relationship between the civilized sailor, and his savage captors. As to O'Connell's tattooing, the author states, "[after the shipwreck], He was soon made a chief – and then it was necessary to give him *caste* by the

¹⁵ Adventures on the south seas

¹⁶ O'Connell p.12

¹⁷ Ibid

¹⁸ O'Connell find page

process of *tattooing*, which is not a useless proceeding, but is a *history of the various chiefs of the nation*.”¹⁹ The author’s claim that O’Connell was “made a chief” is found nowhere in O’Connell’s memoir, and was likely an inclusion by the newspaper to make the story more interesting. This is the earliest mention of O’Connell in American newspapers, and it is clear that some creative license was given to the article’s author, but the changes made in this article are indicative of how O’Connell’s story would be changed over the course of his career as a sideshow performer. In the beginning of his career, the “tattooed man” was advertised as a man who had lived through an adventure in the South Pacific, by his death in 1854, O’Connell was being advertised as surviving captivity, torture, and the threat of cannibalism. Thus, O’Connell provides an illuminating case study regarding how lived experiences were turned into orientalist fantasy for the purposes of entertainment in the mid-nineteenth century. This facet of entertainment culture is invaluable to understand in relation to war propaganda of the 1890s, because it was the very act of turning foreignness into spectacle that established the language and imagery of foreign cultures that were popularized among the American populace at large. When the American public decided to support imperialist actions outside the American mainland, it was this language and imagery that cartoonists and journalists alike employed to sway the public to support their position on American imperialism.

Early Transitions

Through an inspection of advertisements for O’Connell’s show during the 1840’s one can begin to see how the sailor’s story was changed over time to become more exotic, dramatic, and xenophobic. In August of 1840, *The New York Herald* published an advertisement for the

¹⁹ “Adventures on the South Seas.” *Charlotte Journal (Charlotte N.C.)*, December 2, 1836.

Chatham Theater's production of the play *The Muleteer of Palermo* which included an advertisement for O'Connell's sideshow. The ad states that "O'Connell, the tattooed man, will appear in one of his peculiar parts."²⁰ Notably, there is no description of his show, simply a statement that he is tattooed and will appear. It is fair to assume that, at this point, O'Connell's show was simply showing off his tattoos, dancing a jig, and then telling a short version of his adventure story. However, by 1842, O'Connell began working with P.T. Barnum's American Museum as a sideshow act, and the promotion of his act immediately became more dramatic. For example, a Barnum advertisement on the 22nd of November, 1842 states, "Mr. O'Connell, The Tattooed Man, will appear in his celebrated dances, and give an historical account of his sufferings for eleven years, while a prisoner in the hands of barbarous savages."²¹ Notably, Barnum advertised O'Connell with a much more dramatic tone by including colorful language such as "sufferings...prisoner...[and] barbarous savages." Like the *Boston Galaxy* from 1836, the dramatic flair that Barnum added essentially directs the attention of the audience toward the fantasy of captivity and suffering, rather than O'Connell's truly lived experience.

Captivity among "savages" was a popular trope in American literature during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, so Barnum's use of the trope makes sense.²² By insinuating that the sailor was held captive by savages, Barnum was using language and imagery that had been popularized by American captivity narratives for almost two hundred years. Thus, what was originally a dance and lecture, became a fantasy of captivity and torture. O'Connell understood the value of this significant change, for after his employment at the American Museum his advertisements changed to mimic the changes made by Barnum. For example, an ad for

²⁰ *New York Herald*, August 24, 1840.

²¹ *New York Herald*, November 22, 1842.

²² Captivity Narratives in American Literature Namias, others

O'Connell's show at the Amphitheater in New York, less than a week after his show at Barnum's museum, states, "O'Connell...is to appear and exhibit the extraordinary dance that once saved his life while in captivity amongst the savages."²³ Like in Barnum's advertisement, this ad also emphasized the sailor's "captivity." After working with Barnum, O'Connell's show almost always included this emphasis.

Here one can see the dramatic shift in rhetoric present in the advertisement for O'Connell's show. In the early years of his career, O'Connell was simply a "Tattooed Man;" a white body that had been permanently marked by members of a foreign culture. Thus, O'Connell's tattooing was a symbol of authority that validated the sailor's claim that he had spent time in the South Pacific.²⁴ However, once O'Connell began working with Barnum, the tattoos became a symbol of torture, foreignness, and domination of the white man by a foreign people. Instead of emphasizing the tattooing, Barnum began emphasizing the domination with words such as "sufferings," "prisoner," and "captivity," among the "barbarous savages." Thus, what audiences were being sold was not just a spectacle of a dancing, tattooed white man, but a survivor story of a man who lived with an 'uncivilized,' foreign culture. O'Connell's tattoos gave his show some authority, serving as physical proof that the sideshow act did indeed spend time in the South Pacific. This authority allowed showmen, like Barnum, to adjust O'Connell's story so that it played to working-class audience's sense of masculinity and racial and cultural superiority, which would sell more tickets.

²³ *New York Herald*, November 28, 1842.

²⁴ The act of tattooing would not have been completely new to contemporary Americans. Many Native American peoples tattoo, and there has been a tattooing tradition among Western cultures going back to ancient times. However, white men in the mid-nineteenth century were not commonly tattooed, and O'Connell's tattooing was done in a foreign tradition. This is what made O'Connell a spectacle. For further reading on the subject of tattooing in Western culture see Ana Freidman CITE HER DISSERTATION.

Throughout the 1840's, O'Connell enjoyed a successful career as a sideshow performer in a variety of theaters in New York City. Like the ads from 1842, an ad for the Franklin Theater from 1849 states that, "O'Connell, the wonderful 'Tattooed Man,'...will go through a variety of performances peculiar to himself...He will also give an account of the manners and customs of the Savages, and their mode of tattooing."²⁵ Though this ad does not mention captivity or torture, it still emphasizes O'Connell's story as the main part of his show. By 1849, it is fair to assume that the audience would have understood that "give an account of the manners and customs of the Savages" would be a discussion of his time in "captivity" as he was a relatively well-known sideshow act in the local theater circuit. However, the language of this ad is also telling regarding how discussions of foreign peoples were advertised to New Yorkers in 1849. As the ad states, "he will also give an account of the manners and customs," thereby presenting O'Connell as an expert in the customs of people in the South Pacific. This aspect of O'Connell's time on the stage is the most important with regard to later representations of foreign people in popular entertainment. Clearly, by 1849 O'Connell was still performing his fantasy in working-class theaters, but his story had taken on an educational tone. By presenting his fantasy as educational, O'Connell essentially provided validation for working-class, white audience's assumptions about 'other' cultures.²⁶

O'Connell's "Tattooed Man" sideshow must be understood in the context of theater culture during the 1840s and 1850s. Though O'Connell was only one man, the progression of the xenophobia in his show, the emphasis on foreign peoples, and the implication of O'Connell providing educational content in his show is a microcosm of what was going on in the American

²⁵ *New York Herald*, October 21, 1849.

²⁶ Note about Said and the monetization of the fantasy.

theater at large during his career. Theater culture during the eighteenth and early-nineteenth century was much different than what we could consider normal by today's standards. During the early history of America, the theater was one of the only forms of public entertainment, so playhouses were patronized by the leisure class as well as the proletariat. In fact, theater was so popular among Americans that even poor, illiterate Americans could often recite Shakespeare from memory.²⁷

Further, plays were much less voyeuristic than they are by today's standards as the audience would often interact with the shows that they attended. For example, if there was a part of a play that the audience did not like they would boo and hiss, if an actor said a line the audience enjoyed they sometimes made the actors repeat the line multiple times, and if an actor was not talented, audiences would sometimes throw food or objects onto the stage (hence the cliché of throwing food at actors that is present in American films depicting the nineteenth century). Sideshow acts, such as jugglers, magicians, and eventually tattooed men, were included in theatrical plays for this very reason: the theater managers needed something to keep the rowdy audiences entertained in between acts of the play. Thus, a theater from the eighteenth and early-nineteenth century is comparable to an American football game in the twentieth century; with audiences cheering loudly, jeering the entertainers, booing the parts of the show they did not like, and side acts (just like cheerleaders and playful mascots) that came on to entertain while there was a break in the main attraction. By the mid-nineteenth century, however, theaters were starting to encourage attendance by polite, leisure-class audiences who came to quietly enjoy a

²⁷ Levine P?

show, while other entertainment forms such as vaudeville, minstrel shows, dime museums, and circus where they could actively participate in their entertainment.

These changes in theater culture during the mid-nineteenth century is the subject of the book *Highbrow/Lowbrow*, by Lawrence Levine, published in 1988. In this groundbreaking work, Levine finds that there was a stratification of culture during the mid-nineteenth century because of violent, social-class conflicts. As industrialization created a larger working class in major cities like New York City, Boston, and Philadelphia, conflict between the working class and the leisure class became more common. The theater was a space that was patronized by both classes, so playhouses became a battleground for power in the public sphere. According to Levine, the stratification of public entertainment was occurring throughout the 1840s but after a violent riot at the Astor Place theater in 1849, theater managers began actively shaping their content to attract audiences of a specific class. Effectively, Levine finds the theater managers, museum curators, circus showmen, dime museum managers and anyone else who controlled a public entertainment venue during the mid-nineteenth century as the gatekeepers for what we now consider high and low culture.

Levine's emphasis on the Astor Place Riot is grounded in the fact that the riot was deeply connected to major class issues during the mid-nineteenth century. Astor Place was a theater in New York City that was commonly patronized by rich and poor alike. During the theatrical season of 1849, the theater became the battleground in a fight about social class which was projected upon two actors named William McReady and Edwin Forrest. McReady was an Englishman who was well known for his "his aristocratic demeanor, and his identification with the wealthy gentry," making him a perfect representative of the leisure class.(L 63) On the other hand, Forrest was known among New Yorkers for his "militant love of his country, his

outspoken belief in its citizenry, and his frequent articulation of the possibilities of self-improvement and social mobility” making him a favorite among working-class New Yorkers. (Levin 63) On May 7th of 1849, both actors performed *Macbeth* at different theaters. Forrest’s performance received great praise and cheers from the audience while performing at the Broadway Theatre, whereas McCready was never allowed to perform after the audience silenced the actor with “boos and cries of ‘Three groans for the codfish aristocracy,’” as well as an onslaught of “eggs, apples, potatoes, lemons, and...chairs.”(Levine 63) After this performance, McCready wanted to leave the country but was talked out of it by some of the New York elite, including Herman Melville.(Levine 64) On May 10th McCready returned to the Astor Place Theater to perform *Macbeth*, however his return incited a strong reaction from the cities working class. Approximately ten thousand people showed up outside the theater to protest, including eighteen hundred who attended the show, shouting phrases like “Burn the damned den of the aristocracy!”(Levine 64) After the show, the crowd was ordered to disperse and subsequently began throwing stones into the theater and at the military men who arrived to restore order. After the crowd refused to disperse, and continued throwing stones, the military men fired into the crowd. At least twenty-two people were killed and over one hundred and fifty were wounded. (Levin 65) Eighty-six men were arrested, mostly consisting of men from the working class. Five days later, a jury found that “the circumstances existing at the time justified the authorities in giving the order to fire upon the mob.”²⁸

Though the Astor Place Riot was, on the surface, a fight about two actors, the class issues that triggered the riot did not go unnoticed by journalists reporting on the event. For example, the *New York Herald* reported that the riot had caused “nothing short of a controversy and collision

²⁸ “Tragedy at the Opera House.” *New York Herald*, May 15, 1849.

between those who have been styled the ‘exclusives,’ or ‘upper ten,’ and the great popular masses.”²⁹ Another article from the *Philadelphia Public Ledger* states, “It leaves behind a feeling to which this community has hitherto been a stranger – an opposition of classes – the rich and poor...a feeling that there is now in our country, in New York City, what every good patriot hitherto has considered it his duty to deny – *a high and low class.*”³⁰

The Astor Place Riot was a tragedy in and of itself, however, the riot was also a watershed event for class divisions in American popular entertainment forms during the nineteenth century. After the events at Astor Place, theater managers began seeing the typical reactive theater audience as a possible threat to order. Thus, managers began instituting rules for the theater regarding audience behavior, most importantly, requiring that the audiences were to quietly observe the production. These new rules effectively led to a chain of events in which certain types of public entertainment, such as Shakespearean plays or Opera, were relegated to theaters that appealed to a more docile, leisure-class audience, and new types of shows, such as vaudeville, burlesque, minstrels, and the circus, were created to appeal to the working class. This break, essentially, represents the creation of distinct high and low-class culture in American entertainment. The separation of content depending on class during this era is effectively the moment when traditional theater became a high-class activity and entertainment forms such as satire, or variety shows became associated with pop culture for the working class.

Museums were also fundamentally changed during the mid-nineteenth century. During the antebellum period, museums were effectively collections of ‘curiosities,’ such as paintings, stuffed animals, wax figures, sculptures, weapons, and other eclectic pieces which were free to

²⁹ *New York Herald*, May 12, 1849.

³⁰ *Philadelphia Public Ledger*, May 16, 1849.

compete for the public's attention.(L 147) These museums had no focus on public education, rather, they were simply repositories of odd objects. However, once theaters began to cater to high-class audiences, so too did certain museums. In the mid-nineteenth century, some museums, such as the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, began to see themselves as an important institution for public education. (L 149) Thus, museum curators started making decisions regarding what should be considered high art, necessary for the enlightenment of the public. During this era, "high-art" museums dropped the wax figures and other more eccentric pieces and began to feature copies of art from Ancient Greece, paintings from medieval artists, and other art that curators considered valuable to public education. Just as in the theater, museum visitors were expected to attend the museum to observe, take in, and learn from their experience. The high-class theater and museum's emphasis on voyeuristic entertainment essentially solidified a market for stage acts and museum style entertainments that focused more on interaction between the audience and the show's content. This is best exemplified by the rise of P.T. Barnum's American Museum.

In 1841, P.T. Barnum opened The American Museum and immediately began to exploit the public's interest in exhibits that were disappearing from so-called high art museums and theaters. As theater and museums were slowly moving toward educational, refined content, Barnum decided to provide pseudo-educational content that encouraged his audiences to decide for themselves what was real and what was not. In fact, Barnum's first exploit into popular entertainment was in 1835 when he exhibited an eighty-year old former slave by the name of Joice Heath; who Barnum said was the 161-year-old former "mammy" of George Washington. Audiences were encouraged to ask her questions, and she would give details that supported the farce. Barnum travelled around New York with Heath for seven months, until her death in 1836.

Upon her death, Barnum had her autopsy performed in front of fifteen hundred paying customers to prove how old Heath was. This early endeavor into public entertainment showed the young Barnum that there was a profit to be made in trying to fool people. The Joice Heath exhibit also establishes the fact that Barnum had no qualms about exploiting working-class audience's lack of humanity towards non-white people in order to turn a profit. When he opened his American Museum in 1841, 'humbug' and racial exploitation of 'other' cultures was deeply ingrained into the showman's business plan.

Like the more refined museum, Barnum's museum included lecture halls and scientific exhibits, but the American Museum also included shows featuring dwarfs, animals performing human-like activities, lion tamers, Siamese twins, elephants, and anything else the showmen thought would bring in business. Essentially, Barnum's museum was a mixture of educational content and fantastic entertainment. According to Neil Harris, Barnum's museum was a place where the showman could "mount dramatic entertainments or present variety acts under the guise of education and public enlightenment."⁽³⁶⁾ This aspect of Barnum's museum, Harris finds, represents a shift from "Jeffersonian republicanism to Jacksonian democracy."⁽³³⁾ Museums, according to Harris, were deeply influenced by the enlightenment thinking of the Jeffersonian era. When William Peale created the first museum in America, the point was to educate and lift the public's understanding of the world. Barnum exploited this apparatus that was meant to educate by turning the 'museum' into a place of entertainment. In doing so, Barnum quickly made use of the blurry line between education and entertainment by producing exhibits that were presented as educational, but were in fact pure entertainment. For example, in 1842 Barnum exhibited what he called the Feejee Mermaid, which he advertised as a real mermaid found in the South Pacific. In reality, it was a dead fish's tail sewn to the top half of a

monkey. This aspect of Barnum's museum, and the showman's penchant for cleverly advertising his various humbugs, is what made Barnum so successful. By presenting his exhibits as educational, Barnum effectively warped his audiences understanding of the realities of the world outside the American mainland. Although many of Barnum's exhibits were animals, the showman also exploited humans as representatives of the exotic lands outside of America. James O'Connell and his story of 'captivity' in the South Pacific was Barnum's first endeavor into applying his humbug to human bodies. When O'Connell took the stage, he was not an educational exhibit where people could actually learn about "the manners and customs of the Savages," he was a farce, presented as a fact.

James O'Connell is, essentially, the transitional figure in the act of displaying foreignness for entertainment purposes. By donning the stage and showing off his tattoos, O'Connell presented audiences with what would have been perceived as a physical deformity. O'Connell was, in part, a 'freak show.' However, the tattooed man also emphasized the fact that he was going to tell his audience about the people of the South Pacific. Thus, O'Connell was part 'freak' and part 'expert.' After O'Connell's seminal performance at the American Museum, Barnum appropriated this aesthetic and began exhibiting foreign people as authoritative examples of foreign culture, but the display of humans for entertainment purposes absolutely harkened back to 'freak shows' which displayed human deformities. In fact, for the next few decades Barnum would display foreign people in the same shows as acts that exploited Siamese Twins, men and women who were missing limbs, morbidly obese children, bearded ladies, dwarfs, and other more traditional "freak shows." Essentially, Barnum's presentation of foreign people beside people with physical deformities insinuated that their foreignness was a deformity worthy of display. With James O'Connell, the deformity was a tattoo that marked him as a white

man who had spent time among ‘savages,’ but the acts that Barnum would employ after O’Connell were presented as “specimens” from the “East.” Their “deformity” was that they were not white.

Soon after Barnum employed James O’Connell the showman sought out more foreign peoples to put on display at his museum in order to exploit American fantasies about ‘the orient.’ In 1842, Barnum attempted to exhibit a Fijian man named Vendovi, but was ultimately unsuccessful.³¹ Vendovi was a native of Fiji who had been ‘arrested’ (read: kidnapped without due process) by Charles Wilkes during the United States Exploring Expedition 1838-1842 for the murder of two American sailors, including Wilkes’ nephew Henry, a few years prior.³² An American schooner had been shipwrecked and the some of the crew had, allegedly, been killed and eaten by Fijian natives. This story was watched closely by Americans and served to support a common characterization of Fijian people as cannibals.³³ Vendovi died upon arrival to New York, likely due to tuberculosis, so he was never actually exhibited by Barnum, however, this experience did not stop the showman from attempting to bring foreign bodies into America for display in his museum. In 1845, Barnum exhibited a “New Zealand Canibal [sic] chief,” and in 1848 his museum included a Bedouin tribesman.³⁴ In 1850, Barnum exhibited “the celebrated Chinese Collection,” which was an actual Chinese family that included two men, two women, and two children. These exhibits were short lived, but they establish that Barnum was beginning to understand the value of exploiting American fantasies of the East.

³¹ Bogdan p.179

³² **The daily Madisonian., December 16, 1841, Image 2**
About [The daily Madisonian. \(Washington City \[i.e., Washington, D.C.\] 1841-1845](#)

³³ **The Polynesian., November 07, 1840, Image 1**
About [The Polynesian. \(Honolulu \(Oahu\), Hawaii\) 1840-1841](#)

³⁴ E pluribus Barnum p. 166 or NY Sun- follow citation in secondary also American Orient- David Weir

Barnum's first real investment into creating an orientalist representation of the East came in 1851 after he spent \$109,000 developing what he called "Barnum's Great Asiatic Caravan Museum and Menagerie."³⁵ According to Barnum's autobiography, he sent two men to Ceylon (Sri Lanka) to purchase some elephants, but they could not buy enough in town so his employees "took one hundred and sixty natives and plunged into the jungles, where, after many most exciting adventures, they succeeded in securing thirteen elephants."³⁶ In 1851, Barnum's associates arrived in New York with ten elephants and a native "Cingalese" man who handled the unfortunate animals. Barnum subsequently "added a caravan of wild animals and many museum curiosities...including horses, vans, carriages, tent, etc...and commenced operations."³⁷ Barnum touted the elephant handler as a "Cingalese Chief," dressed him up in an "Oriental costume," and exhibited him as a representative of his people.³⁸ Barnum travelled "all sections of the country" with this caravan, effectively presenting the elephants as representatives of Eastern fauna, and the elephant handler as a living example of the "Cingalese" people.

Barnum's "Asiatic Caravan" was the showman's first real investment into developing the fantasy of the East, but it was far less dramatic than his original idea which he called the "Congress of Nations." According to his autobiography, Barnum states that in 1849 he conceived of a show that brought "specimens" from "all the nations that could be reached by land or sea." He goes on to state, "I meant to secure a man and woman, as perfect as could be procured, from every accessible people, civilized and barbarous, on the face of the globe...I can conceive of no exhibition which would be more interesting...to all classes of patrons."³⁹

³⁵ Struggles- Barnum, - 357 Also, \$109,000 is around \$3.5 million today.

³⁶ Struggles Barnum 356

³⁷ Ibid struggles 357

³⁸ ibid

³⁹ Struggles 271

Barnum actually hired an agent to “make arrangements” for this exhibition, but it was interrupted by the showman’s decision to bring Jenny Lind to America for a singing tour. The fact that he was unsuccessful in this endeavor is irrelevant, Barnum’s recollections of this idea shows that in 1849, the showman was beginning to understand the monetary value of exploiting American’s interest in ‘other’ cultures.

Barnum’s decision to begin exhibiting foreign people is reflective of American ideas about foreign cultures during the 1840s. In 1845, at the height of James O’Connell’s popularity, the idea that Anglo-Saxon Americans were destined by God to bring American ‘civilization’ to ‘savage’ cultures began to proliferate in American media sources. This idea best manifests itself in the phrase “Manifest Destiny,” coined by John O’Sullivan in 1845. In an article entitled “Annexation,” published in *The United States Magazine and Democratic Review*, O’Sullivan expounds his theory for the future of America that includes the consolidation of ‘American’ lands from the Atlantic to the Pacific.⁴⁰ The point of O’Sullivan’s article was to argue for the annexation of Texas, but his predictions for how far Americans would take expansionist policies were prescient. O’Sullivan states that it was America’s “manifest destiny to overspread the continent allotted by Providence for the free development of our yearly multiplying millions.”⁴¹ The American government would obtain the lands in the Mississippi Valley, California, Oregon, and Washington, within a decade after O’Sullivan’s statement, solidifying American land from the Atlantic to the Pacific.

In the case of manifest destiny, O’Sullivan is of minor importance. O’Sullivan was not a government official making policies that encouraged American expansion. He was not on the

⁴⁰ John O’Sullivan, “Annexation,” *The United States Magazine and Democratic Review*, Volume 17 (New York: 1845), 5-6, 9-10.

⁴¹ Ibid

frontier engaging in the rape and murder of Native American peoples.⁴² The author of the phrase “Manifest Destiny” was simply remarking upon a general feeling among the American populace of racial and cultural superiority, suggesting that such ideas would eventually lead Americans, “armed with the plough and the rifle” to spread across the land, “marking its trail with schools and colleges, courts and representative halls, mills and meeting-houses.”⁴³ The idea that Americans would ‘civilize’ the many Native American lands and people that laid between themselves and the Pacific Ocean was at the heart of nineteenth-century American expansionist argument. “Manifest Destiny” was not a policy or a new idea, it was a validation for the indefensible rape and murder of millions of people.⁴⁴

Although O’Sullivan’s prophetic article specifically discusses expansion in North American lands, the idea of manifest destiny was quickly employed by the press to argue for American expansion into foreign lands that laid outside of the North American continent. For example, a *New York Daily Times* article, published in 1851, states “Manifest destiny and the horizon move together. The national progress is best described as expansion.”⁴⁵ The author goes on to argue for the annexation of Hawaii and the Sandwich Islands in the South Pacific, suggesting that Americans would not meet much resistance because Christian missionaries had made the Island peoples a “conquered culture.”⁴⁶ The author goes on to argue that the people who lived on these islands were dying and since they had been dominated by previous Western colonizers, that it was inevitable that either the U.S. or one of the European powers would move in and reap the benefits of an agricultural colony.⁴⁷ Essentially, James O’Connell, P.T. Barnum,

⁴² See Dunbar-Ortiz, Greenberg, Brooks add here for books on the frontier.

⁴³ O’Sullivan

⁴⁴ Greenberg

⁴⁵ “Annexation in the Pacific.” *New York Daily Times*; Nov 11, 1851. p.2

⁴⁶ Ibid

⁴⁷ Ibid

and the American press were all tapping into a feeling among the American populace that it was their duty to bring civilization to the 'savage' island cultures of the South Pacific.

Moreover, some in the American press overtly made a connection to expansionist policy and patriotism. For example, in a *New York Daily Times* article entitled "The Science of Manifest Destiny," the author suggests that America needed to expand into Cuba, Hawaii, and the Sandwich Islands in order to spread American Republicanism.⁴⁸ The article states, "Every nation, as it passes through the swaddling-bands and other needful restrictions of infancy, calls for wider room, and gets it by the strong arm or cunning policy." The author goes on to state, "Everywhere beyond our own borders, on this Western hemisphere, do we see the need of the steady, ballasting traits of Anglo-Saxonism. It will never do to argue the practicability of our system beyond the confines of the race until the experiment is abundantly tried."⁴⁹ Clearly, the author of this article sees a necessity for white men to spread their 'civilization' and Republicanism to 'uncivilized' areas of the world, including the South Pacific.

Although the author of the aforementioned article attempted to claim that it was the Anglo-Saxon people's duty to spread their way of life, the article also includes an illuminating argument as to what benefits expansion would bring. For example, after discussing the reasons why America should colonize Cuba and some of the Islands in the South Pacific, the author states, "Japan must abandon old fashions in our favor, that we may unbar the obscure chambers of her fabulous wealth, and share the contents."⁵⁰ Thus, the author was using patriotism to sell the idea of colonizing foreign lands, but there was clearly another goal of using the islands to open trade with Asian countries. This statement is indicative of actual American policy toward

⁴⁸ "The Science of Manifest Destiny." *New York Daily Times* (1851-1857); Sep 9, 1852;

⁴⁹ Ibid

⁵⁰ Ibid

Asian countries during the mid-nineteenth century as America signed trade treaties with China and Japan in 1844 and 1854, respectively.⁵¹

[Paragraph about popularity of Ethnology and Physiology during the early 1850s]

The late 1840s and early 1850s were an important time for the development of “science based” ideas about foreign cultures. When P.T. Barnum decided to begin exhibiting foreign bodies, the showman was simply taking advantage of the public discourse of his time. Academics of the era were publishing books about how different the “savages” were from Anglo-Saxon peoples, so Barnum turned this discourse into a faux educational spectacle. Instead of reading about the difference between races in a book, one could just go down to Barnum’s American Museum and see it for yourself. After Barnum’s “Asiatic Caravan” tour, foreign people from the “East” became a staple of his museum and traveling circus. Like other, similar forms of public entertainment, Barnum continued to exhibit human ‘curiosities,’ such as dwarfs, and people with physical deformities, but his shows also exhibited foreign people as examples of what ‘other’ cultures are like. Barnum used these people to entertain, but these shows essentially validated American assumptions about racial superiority under the guise of education. One of Barnum’s most famous exhibits, “What is it?,” is a perfect example of this.

[Paragraph about What is it? Exhibit]

[Paragraph about Congress of Nations in 1870s (Animalizing humans/treating people as specimens)]

⁵¹ In 1844, after the *First Opium War*, China and the U.S. signed the Treaty of Wanghia, opening up Chinese ports to American ships, and ten years later, Commodore Mathew Perry landed in Japan and established a trade relationship with the U.S.-Japan Treaty of Peace and Amity, signed in March of 1854.

[Paragraph about Costentenus, New Tattooed Man, (fantasies of the East)]

[Paragraph about Bill Cody's Wild West Show (made possible by Barnum's success, Brings the "East" to the Western Frontier *Go East, Young Man*, Francaviglia)]

[Patriotism in the Circus and Wild West Show, exploitation of foreignness in order to claim an identity as an American.]

[Events leading up to Spanish American War (Yellow Journalism in New York)]

[Political Cartooning and the appropriation of the foreigner as uncivilized savage imagery created by O'Connell and Barnum, mention lack of text.]

[Short explanation of the events of the SAW]

[Post war cartooning about whether or not America should become imperialists, both sides of argument use imagery established in the circus]

[America does, indeed, become imperialists]

[Conclusion]

