

The history of tattooing in popular American culture obviously does not end in 1898. Myriad scholarly works have been written about tattooing in the twentieth century, all with a different take on how and why tattooing has become popular among large groups of the American public. However, the late nineteenth century represents a break in the narrative of tattooing. When James O'Connell took the stage, and showed off his tattoos, the tattoo was presented as evidence of savage barbarism practiced by foreign island cultures. To contemporary audiences, the tattoo itself proved the superiority of white, Western civilization and the inferiority of the uncivilized island peoples. For over six decades, American concepts of tattooing changed due to a plethora of factors including imperialism, popular entertainment culture, ideas of American masculinity, the rise of women in popular entertainment, and an increase in tattooing traditions among sailors and military men. However, the late nineteenth century represents the moment when tattooing transitioned from a barbaric, island tradition, into a distinctly American expression of patriotism. Though the tattoo became American during this time period, the associations that made the tattoo so dramatic in the early tattooed man shows still persisted. Americans, effectively, appropriated the tattoo into popular American culture, and found different reasons to imply that foreign cultures needed Western *civilization*. Though the history of twentieth century popular entertainment and twentieth century American imperialism are two, relatively, separate histories, they both find strong roots in the tattooed sideshows of the nineteenth century.

By the turn of the twentieth century, circuses had become one of the most popular forms of public entertainment for American audiences. In fact, according to Denet, HOW MANY Americans visited the circus in the first two decades of the twentieth century, bringing the unique collections of animals and "human oddities" to cities across America. Although P.T. Barnum

died in 1891, the circus that bore his name continued to entertain millions with shows that “humanized animals, and animalized humans.” (Dennet 10) Like the circus of the nineteenth century, the twentieth century theater presented examples of the “other” such as savages, missing links, and ape men. The shows also included lion tamers, equestrian shows, snake charmers, and trained elephants. The circus business basically capitalized on shows that presented audiences with something they could not find anywhere else; exotic animals that could do tricks, people from across the world that one would never encounter without the circus, basically, the circus provided an experience with the outside world that one may never see. Instead that world was brought to your home town, and you could visit that world for a small fee. The circus was, therefore, the first example of escapism that lies at the foundation of American popular entertainment.

Essentially, the circus laid the foundations for American media companies like Disney and other major media conglomerates. For example, Disney’s first animated features included seven dwarfs, “human oddities” such as little people had been a part of the circus since Barnum employed Tom Thumb; Pinocchio was a toy child whose nose grew when he lied, physical deformities were a major part of the circus sideshow from the beginning, Pinocchio even includes a part of the film in which he is turned into a donkey and sold to a circus; Dumbo is literally the story of an elephant and his experience as a circus performer. The list of connections between Disney and the circus is numerous and undeniable, but the important fact to take away from this connection lies in the fact that Disney is one of the largest creators of popular entertainment in contemporary American media. The influence of Disney on American culture is deep seeded and unavoidable. Following Disney’s lead, myriad other networks have created cartoons with anthropomorphic animals, most sports teams have animal mascots that dance and

entertain crowds, when a football team wins the Superbowl players are contractually obligated to say that they are going to celebrate by going to Disneyworld. Myriad scholarship has explored the influence of Disney on American culture, but the point here is that Disney was a direct evolution of the shows that were created by early circus showmen like P.T. Barnum. Like Barnum's Tattooed Man sideshow and his "What is it?" exhibit, Disney has presented audiences with stories like Aladdin, Moana, The Jungle Book, and numerous others that are effectively stories of cultural "others" and their experiences across the world. Essentially, our culture has been shaped by the exotic, by the experience of bringing the outside world into the homes of Americans through television and movies. This connection shapes the way Americans see the outside world, and is, thus, vital to our understanding of how imperialism works.

Disney is not the only company that has taken advantage of American audience's affinity for experiencing "other" cultures. All major movie studios have created films of White people interacting with foreign cultures. Panchinko, a story of a Korean family in the twentieth century, was the ninth best-selling novel of 2017. Television shows like Lost, Survivor, Taboo, Game of Thrones, all present audiences with exotic content that allows audiences to bring a distant time or place into the home. American popular entertainment culture is at its heart the presentation of the exotic, a voyeuristic examination of humans in far-away places or times. The popularity of these kinds of stories can quickly be traced back to the circus and the presentation of people and animals that emphasized the exotic nature of the world outside the American borders. Thus, by constantly creating such content, American media creators are essentially conquering foreign lands through media, and bringing the exotic into consciousness of the American people. It is through this kind of presentation of the outside world that Americans learn about the outside world. Like Said's theory of Orientalism, the outside world becomes a concept rather than a

reality; a world that is created through the lens of Western content creators. By owning the way the outside world is conceptualized by Americans, American media sources can, thus, control how Americans see foreign cultures. Throughout the history of America this has served to validate imperialism, and can still be seen in modern American concepts of the foreign other.

Further, the binary of American superiority and foreign inferiority is found at the heart of almost every military engagement in American history. In our early history, Native Americans were seen as savages who were simply in the way of American innovation. With the Spanish American War, island cultures were presented as people in need of civilization. The development of the Atomic Bomb in WWII included using foreign islands as a place to test out our weapon of mass destruction because an island in the middle of the Pacific Ocean was not seen as valuable. The Cold War was a war of ideology, but part of our military strategy was to take over islands around the world so that American ships could quickly respond to nuclear attacks. The Korean War and the Vietnam Wars were both presented to Americans as a war to protect the people of said countries from the evils of communism. The Gulf War and the more recent military engagements in Afghanistan and Iraq were presented as protection against foreign cultures that threatened the American way of life. In sum, American wars have almost always included some idea that America was there to fight against the spread of culture that threatened American culture. The American system has, thus, always been used as a reason to conquer foreign lands. To get the support of the people, the powerful have always presented far away lands as a threat to the American people, despite the fact that most wars have been directly tied to the exploitation of foreign resources. And therein lies the rub, our culture has been inundated by the idea of superiority over foreign cultures, yet very little argument has been made regarding the fault of this logic. What makes American culture better? Has capitalism ever benefited any

group other than the rich and powerful? If the world would not have industrialized so quickly, would we be threatening the very existence of humans on this beautiful planet? Though creating a romanticized idea of “primitive” cultures is just as problematic and arguing that they are culturally inferior, it does beg the question: what makes our system so much better than the “others?”

My point here is not to simply rant about American concepts of culture, instead the point of this work is to show how something as simple as the tattoo can be tied to a long history of imperialist ideas that were used as excuses to engage in the rape and murder of foreign cultures. War existed before the tattooed sideshow, this is obviously a fact. However, the history of war is unabashedly about power. One culture has a larger army and therefore took over another culture because they were less powerful. What happened in the nineteenth century was a shift in the concept of war. War was not just about power, it was about civilizing and bringing foreign cultures into the modern world. The power dynamic, thus, took a back seat to the idea of doing foreigners a favor by conquering their lands and people. Though this may be observable in other instances, it is readily apparent from the Spanish American War up until the War in Iraq. By understanding this fact, hopefully more Americans can begin to see through the faulty reasoning that is typically used as an excuse to go to war, and possibly begin a new age where cultures are respected for their differences rather than forced to be the same. It is an idealists hope, but it is not out of the realm of possibility.