

Tattoos and Circuses: How P.T. Barnum Shaped the Way We See Tattoos

The topic of my proposed thesis is the influence of captivity narratives and the American circus on the development of a prevalent discourse regarding tattooing in popular American culture between 1840 and 1890. This study will be based on primary sources such as captivity narratives, artwork depicting captivity, and newspaper articles. The captivity narratives my work will use range from the year 1682 to 1857. Most of these narratives were published in New York, but the setting of their narratives moved West with the frontier. For example, in Mary Rowlandson's seminal captivity narrative in 1682 the events of the story took place in Massachusetts, but by 1857 the captivity narrative of Olive Oatman took place in Arizona and California. These narratives sold thousands of copies around the country so they present a national context for contemporary Euro-American representations of Native Americans and captivity.

Some of the artwork that depicts captivity will be particularly important to my work as they exemplify the way visual imagery was used to provide commentary about non-European Americans. Many of the images my work will analyze were included in the published captivity narratives, but the most important artworks for my project are stand-alone paintings from New England, produced between 1840 and 1870. During this period there is a notable increase in sexual, romanticized depictions of famous American captivity stories from the eighteenth and early nineteenth century.

Most of the newspaper articles my project will be using originate from New York between 1840 and 1890. These articles all discuss tattooing for various reasons, but there is a

consistency in the way tattooing was discussed the newspaper over this time period. That consistency is, arguably, influenced by tattooed sideshows. As tattooed sideshows became more popular, newspapers around the country began covering the topic so my project's regional scope will widen as I track the way tattooing was discussed over time.

To develop my arguments, my project will employ three main sub-topics; industrialization and the development of the working-class audience, gender and sexuality in popular cultural forms, and the influence of race on visual culture. In order to understand the development of the American theater and circus which provided a platform for tattooed sideshows, one must first understand how industrialization led to the growth of working-class audiences. My work will not attempt to explain all aspects of industrialization, but will, rather, explain the shift in the theater from middle-class to working-class audiences in New York. The change in the audience meant that the content of the entertainment must also change. This shift is responsible for the development of tattooed man sideshows.

Gender and Sexuality will be a running theme throughout my analysis of captivity narratives, and tattooed sideshow performances because both of these histories exhibit highly gendered and sexualized characteristics. When looking at the stories told in captivity narratives and circus sideshows, it is clear that the agenda of the narratives is highly dissimilar depending on the gender of the main character. In stories of female captives, and in tattooed lady sideshows, the stories depict the main characters as poor victims of brutal savages. When stories were about men the narratives were about the subject's bravery and eventual sexual relationship with their captor's women. The sexuality and gendered aspect of the narratives must be acknowledged if one is to accurately assess these documents.

The influence of racism on visual culture is another sub-topic that will provide perspective when analyzing many of the images that my work will employ. Simply noting that the imagery depicting captivity was explicitly racist does not add anything to my narrative, however, placing the imagery in the context of oppressive cultural interaction between Euro-Americans and Native Americans on the frontier during the mid-eighteenth century offers a valuable context to assess the imagery.

Tattooing most clearly enters popular American culture in New York, so that will be the major point of focus for my project. In the early-nineteenth century, tattooing became increasingly popular among white European men who had traveled to the Polynesian islands. These men obtained tattoos as a souvenir of their travels, but once they returned home they concocted tall tales of captivity and torture so that they would not be seen as having “gone native.” Tattooed man sideshows were the beginning of a long history of monetizing these stories in order to captivate audiences. In 1828, the first tattooed man sideshow was performed by a sailor named John Rutherford. Rutherford traveled around England telling stories of captivity and torture among savages, but, in reality, he had jumped ship during a voyage to New Zealand and lived among the Maori peoples (who have a particularly extreme tradition of tattooing the face) for several years.

James O’Connell was the first tattooed man in North America to successfully monetize his tattoos, appearing in P.T. Barnum’s American Museum in 1841. Like Rutherford, O’Connell told audiences that he was kidnapped by savages, held down, and was tattooed as a form of torture. However, according to O’Connell, he bore his marks so bravely the chief allowed him to marry the Island princess before he made his escape. Newspaper articles that retold

O'Connell's fictitious story are the first to mention tattooing as an act of marking the skin. Over the next fifty years, tattooed man sideshows would go on to become immensely popular, further spreading tall tales of captivity and torture among "savages" to large American audiences well into the twentieth century. After the sideshows become popular in New York, and later around the country, tattooing was consistently written about as evidence of savage barbarism despite the fact that many Euro-Americans from all walks of life were obtaining their own permanent piece of Polynesian culture.

I am planning on presenting my thesis in the form of a digital project. A digital presentation of my study will allow for a deeper understanding of how captivity narratives and the circus shaped the American public's image of tattooing because much of the evidence of this association is visual. Using a website, and an archive of imagery, I will strengthen my basic thesis by providing interactive webpages that users can use to look at the images and the newspaper articles for themselves. Thus, I will complete a journal-length article about tattooing and the circus, along with a website that provides a digital presentation of my basic arguments along with relevant imagery.

My working thesis is as follows: The presentation of tattooed men in circus sideshows between 1840 and 1890, effectively turned tattoos and tattooing into a symbol of uncivilized people. During this time period, the theater and the circus were both becoming vastly popular forms of working-class entertainment, and captivity narratives were at the height of their popularity. Clever showmen subsequently took advantage of an opportunity to monetize their theatrical performances by sensationalizing tattooing as a symbol of captivity among the "savages." The association between tattooing and savagery is consistently seen in American

newspaper articles between 1840 and 1890 that mention tattooing, thereby providing evidence that the circus and theater influenced the way tattooing was discussed in popular media.

One of the earliest scholarly works that examined the subject of tattooing is criminologist Cesare Lombroso's *Criminal Man*, published in 1878. Although *Criminal Man* specifically seeks to present common characteristics of criminals, Lombroso presents the foundational discourse about tattooing and its link to criminality among Western Europeans. Lombroso dedicated an entire chapter of *Criminal Man* to the subject of tattooing among criminals, arguing that tattooing was an act of "primitive man;" a subset of human being that had not evolved yet to the level of "civilized" westerners. The author argues that criminals tattooed themselves because they shared characteristics with biologically unevolved "savages." Lombroso's work is extremely flawed for its clear adherence to Social Darwinism, but it is a foundational piece of scholarship that draws a connection between tattooing, criminality, and atavism that would influence anthropological studies of tattooing in the early-twentieth century by anthropologists such as Wilhelm Joest, Wilfred Hambly, and Albert Parry.

The subject of tattooing among Western Europeans and Americans was approached by anthropologists, historians, and psychologists during the twentieth century, with each developing various arguments regarding *why* people tattoo themselves. These works built upon foundational ideas that connected tattooing to mental disorders and criminality, however, in 1980 historian and anthropologist Greg Dening became the first scholar to explore *how* tattooing came to be stigmatized in Western society in his work *Islands and Beaches: Discourses of a Silent Land*. Dening argues that early sailors received tattoos as a way to assimilate or communicate peace with the Native peoples of the Polynesian islands, however,

when they returned to Western society the tattoo communicated something different: the men returning home with tattoos brought with them a permanent example of a white man accepting a “savage” culture. Denning’s work, essentially, makes the argument that tattooing became stigmatized because it was a form of non-verbal communication that communicated belonging to the Polynesian people, but to Western society, the tattoo communicated an acceptance of primitive culture.

The topic of tattooing in Polynesian culture was revolutionized in 1993 with anthropologist/historian Alfred Gell’s *Wrapping in Images*. Gell deeply explores the meaning of tattoos in the social, political, and religious institutions of the different islands that made up Polynesian society in the late-eighteenth century through an analysis of missionary journals, travel journals, and first-hand accounts of individuals who had lived among the Polynesian people. Gell contextualizes his study of Polynesian culture by discussing the Western perception of tattooing as a savage act. For Gell, early twentieth-century scholarship, namely Lombroso’s work, used flawed scientific studies to establish an association between tattooing and criminality which subsequently influenced the way tattoos were perceived by society at large. Gell argues that the association between tattooing and criminals was an example of class prejudice because members of the lower classes in Western society during the nineteenth and twentieth century were more likely to be tattooed, and, thus, Western society viewed tattooing as something “civilized” people avoided.

One work that discusses *how* tattooing became stigmatized is cultural anthropologist Margo DeMello’s *Bodies of Inscription* (2000). DeMello argues that tattooing was first an act of inclusion among European and American sailors and military personnel, but over time the

practice was appropriated by criminals for similar reasons: inclusion into a group. DeMello's work tracks changes in the American discourse regarding tattooing from its beginnings in the nineteenth century up to the nineteen nineties. DeMello traces the ebb and flow of American perceptions of tattooing from times when it was seen as patriotic, such as during WW1, to times when it was seen as uncivilized, such as during the Cold War. My work supports DeMello's arguments that American perceptions of tattooing were influenced by social changes but with a new focus on how major institutions, namely the nineteenth-century circus, effectively shaped American perceptions in the earliest years of the tattoo's inclusion in American popular culture.

Historian Anna Felicity Friedman's Ph.D. dissertation *Tattooed Transculturites*, published in 2012, is an important piece of scholarship on the topic of tattooing in Western society. Friedman argues that the historical and anthropological scholarship on tattooing is wrong about how and when tattooing became a common part of Western culture. All of the previously mentioned scholarship, as well as many not discussed here, state that tattooing was introduced to Western culture by the travel journals of Captain James Cook; a famous voyager from the late-eighteenth century. Friedman convincingly argues that this is patently incorrect and that tattooing was actually known in Western society well before the voyages of Cook and his crew. For Friedman, the problem comes down to etymology as Cook is the first recorded person to use the word "tattoo," however, Friedman argues, tattooing is referenced in myriad sources throughout European and American history under various different names including, scratched, marked, decorated, and inked. This thesis is invaluable to my work because it supports the idea

that something other than simple cross-cultural interaction is to blame for the way tattooing was stigmatized in America.

My study will offer an alternative explanation for Euro-American perceptions of tattooing that places more emphasis on the influence of captivity narratives and the American circus on the American discourse on tattooing during the mid-eighteenth century. Although public perceptions of tattooing in America is briefly discussed by Dening, Gell, and DeMello it has not been given proper attention. All of the aforementioned scholarship, except for Friedman, accepts the commonly held idea that tattooing was associated with sailors and indigenous peoples because many sailors and indigenous populations were tattooed. The scholarship on tattooing has, thus, accepted this circular logic and subsequently moved on to discussing why sailors, indigenous peoples, and, later, groups like criminals and soldiers, tattooed themselves. Only Friedman notes that tattooing was common among many groups in America during this time period. My study will address this paradox and look at how circus sideshows effectively *created* the association between tattooing and sailors and indigenous people.

All of the sources my project will use are easily found on the internet through database archives such as the Library of Congress website, The New York Times archive, and archive.org. Many of the images that will be assessed can be found in various internet archives, but the scholarly works and the captivity narratives are all available through the CSUSM library.

I have already completed much of the necessary research for this project, which builds on research that I conducted as an undergraduate. For example, my undergraduate seminar paper was a study of how political cartoons depicting James G. Blaine with tattoos effected the

1884 presidential election. I have also, completed an independent study with Dr. Hajar focusing on the development of the American theater and circus during the nineteenth century, and my History 502 project was an assessment of how women in captivity narratives reflected the relationship between European colonizers and Native Americans during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

I plan on completing my project by the middle of spring semester, a plan that is ambitious, yet I believe it is plausible as I have already compiled the works that are relevant to my topic and, and I have a good idea as to what it is I am trying to say. My plan is to turn in my proposal and then begin working on my article. As soon as my proposal is accepted, then I will turn in the first section of my article and begin working on the next section, and so on until my thesis is ready for defense. While I complete the written section of my thesis I will be constantly archiving the images I plan to use and will create a website when I am close to finished with the written section so that the digital component accurately reflects the final thesis of my project.

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