

In the history of empires, there is a common theme of conquerors insinuating that the conquered would be better off as subjects of empire. Some empires suggested that the conquered would be better protected from invasion if they were a part of the empire, some insinuated that the souls of the conquered would be saved by one God or another, some empires have suggested that they were spreading superior forms of government such as democracy, and some claimed to be bringing civilization and moral uplift to a primitive culture. Regardless, conquest is often presented by the empire as beneficial to the conquered. Thus, how this idea develops within the culture of an empire can shed light on the processes that work to validate the conquest of foreign land and people.

In this paper, I will analyze the evolution of an imperial discourse within commercialized entertainment that exhibited foreign island cultures during the mid-nineteenth century. Starting in the late 1830s, showmen began to exhibit Pacific Islanders as a part of their so-called 'freakshows.' Despite being almost complete fabrications, these 'exhibits' were presented as accurate and scientific representations of so-called uncivilized cultures. Over the following decades, the foreign 'freak' became a staple of the public entertainment industry, infiltrating museums, circuses, and World's Fairs around the country.

After sixty years of exhibition in the public entertainment sector, the popular culture imagery of foreign island cultures made its way into political cartooning meant to remark upon American imperialism. Following the Spanish American War of 1898, the American media began fervently discussing whether or not America should colonize Spain's former colonies. Within this debate, the Euro-American media subsequently appropriated the images that popular entertainments had developed in an attempt to garner public support for American colonization of Guam, Puerto Rico, the Philippines, and Cuba.

This history begins with a performer named James O’Connell; a tattooed ex-sailor who was exhibited on stage as a living survivor of captivity among island peoples in the Pacific. O’Connell came to the United States in 1836 after living with the people of Pohnpei in Micronesia for eleven years, and he quickly made his way into New York’s theater circuit in order to tell audiences about his experiences.¹ As one could assume, tattooing was not common among white, European Americans in 1836, so his incredible markings gave him a sense of authenticity as a man who had lived among a distant, foreign culture. Though much of his performance was rife with hyperbolic storytelling and unbelievable tales of adventure, his was the first commercialized public entertainment in America to feature themes of civilization, savagery, captivity, and barbarism with regard to island cultures. The idea that foreign, non-white cultures were uncivilized savages was not a new idea; Europeans and Euro-Americans had used those terms to describe Native Americans long before O’Connell ever took the stage. However, O’Connell’s show was the first commercialized entertainment to apply that language to Pacific island cultures. Further, O’Connell’s performance eventually included a discussion of the “manners and customs” of the Pohnpian people, therein establishing his show as not only entertaining but also educational.²

Soon after James O’Connell began performing in New York, he began working with a young theater owner named Phineas Taylor Barnum. Barnum is perhaps the most famous showman of the nineteenth century, and is definitely the most important figure regarding the representation of foreign island cultures as uncivilized and savage (which I will henceforth refer to as the imperial representation). Barnum is most famous for his penchant for advertisement

¹ Robert Bogdan, *Freakshow* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1988), 242. See also: Amelia Klem Osterud, *The Tattooed Lady; A History* (Maryland: Taylor Trade Publishing), 45. See Also: George Odell, *Annals of the New York stage*, Vol. 4 (New York City: Columbia University Press), 1928.

² *New York Herald* (New York City, NY), Nov. 11, 1849.

and his influence on the development of American culture, but for our purposes his relevance lies in the way he contributed to the evolution of the imperial representation. Barnum owned and ran a popular museum in New York, the American Museum, and from the early years of his career, the showman often exhibited foreign island peoples as a part of his freakshow.³ Over the course of his career, Barnum exhibited people who he claimed were cannibals, missing links in evolution, and living representations of the uncivilized peoples from around the world. Often the showman would exploit contemporary scientific theories and subjects, such as ethnology and evolution, to represent foreign people as scientifically inferior to his white audience. Unlike other showmen's exhibitions of foreign peoples, Barnum took advantage of the ambiguity between education and entertainment and built a narrative that foreign people were inherently unevolved, uncivilized, and inferior. Along with presenting foreign peoples as simple 'freaks,' Barnum also presented them as specimens that supported the scientific classification of races.

Between the 1870s and 1880s, exhibitions of foreign bodies as representatives of the uncivilized world became a staple of travelling circuses. The exhibitions would always be presented as a way for audiences to become more cosmopolitan by learning about foreign cultures, but the various exhibitions consistently emphasized the subjects' lack of 'civilization' as the reason for their display. By exhibiting foreign cultures in this way, the foreigner was turned into a stereotypical caricature of inferiority due to their lack of what showmen called civilization. By using pseudo-science and public display, these shows delivered deeply racist entertainments under the pretext of educating their audience.

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Fifty years after Barnum opened the American Museum as a place where one could view all things exotic, including human beings, exhibitions of foreign lands and people gained a sense of legitimacy as they made their way into the 1893 World's Columbian Exhibition in Chicago. World's fairs/exhibitions have since disappeared from the public entertainment business, but they were once incredibly popular events in which a city would exhibit arts, science, culture, and technological advancements from around the world. These events happened in cities across the world in the second half of the nineteenth century, and they were very much considered to be informative, educational experiences that taught their audiences about the technological and cultural progress happening in the rest of the world. In 1893, Chicago housed a World's Fair which included small exhibits that represented the cultures of more 'exotic' lands and peoples.⁴ These exhibitions blurred the lines "between 'scientific' ethnological displays of the world's people and sensational exploitation of the exotic for profit."⁵ Essentially, the Columbian Exhibition provided legitimacy for the imperial representation of foreign bodies, making the practice seem legitimate and educational.

By 1898, Americans had been entertained by imperial representations of foreign island cultures for over sixty years. After war broke out between America and Spain in April of that year, the imperial representation of foreignness was quickly appropriated by American media sources as they began to discuss the prospects of colonizing Spain's former colonies of Cuba, Puerto Rico, and the Philippines while also remarking on America's decision to annex Hawaii. The Spanish American War lasted only four months, ending with a resounding victory for the American military, and the topic of imperialism began to dominate the American news cycle.

⁴ The 1876 Centennial Exhibition in Philadelphia was the first World's Exhibition to include racial displays, but exploitation of race in the Columbian Exposition was much more pronounced and discussed among critics. Both events are worthy of analysis, but the Columbian is much more indicative of my argument.

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Within the imperialism debate, both pro-imperialists and anti-imperialists alike used language and imagery that had been developed in the entertainment sector over six decades of foreign exhibitions. For the pro-imperialist, the island cultures that inhabited Spain's former colonies were uncivilized and would benefit from American leadership. These arguments were largely based on the idea that the Americans would bring civilization and democracy to the islands, thereby raising their status in the world. For the anti-imperialists, the island cultures were uncivilized and would never accept American leadership because they were too savage to ever become civilized. The anti-imperialists also argued that by colonizing island lands, Americans would be accepting uncivilized cultures as equals.

During the debate about American imperialism within the American media, political cartoonists employed imagery of foreign island peoples that had been established in the public entertainment sector. Between 1898 and 1899, cartoonists depicted people from the aforementioned countries as children, circus sideshows, blackface minstrels, animals, and base savages as a way to remark on the question of imperialism. Though the litany of political cartoons depicted the foreign nations in a variety of ways, the message of these cartoons always remarked upon the civilization, or lack thereof, of island cultures. When analyzing images, it is important to not only look at what is present, but also what is missing. In the case of the political cartoons being discussed here, it is notable that there is not much variety in the way foreign peoples were depicted. The cartoonists could have created images that made any argument they wished, that America stood for freedom not colonization, or they could have drawn the foreign peoples as regular human beings to humanize the issue, but they all chose to depict the foreign nations in the same way the circus did: as uncivilized savages. My work aims to better understand why this happened.

This work will build upon the existing scholarship that looks at the way nineteenth century concepts of civilization and manhood contributed to contemporary views of non-white races and how these views were used to validate American imperialism. The seminal work in this historiography is Gail Bederman's *Manliness and Civilization*, published in 1995. Bederman's work is a treatise on American's concept of masculinity at the turn of the century, and her work investigates how and why the concepts of masculinity and civilization changed over time. For Bederman, "a variety of social and cultural encouraged white middle-class men to develop new explanations of why they, as men, ought to wield power and authority."⁶ Bederman's work subsequently sets out to establish "a central set of ideas that turn-of-the-century Americans frequently used to tie male power to racial dominance-the discourse of 'civilization.'"⁷ Throughout her work, Bederman examines how white, male society conceptualized manliness as the ability to dominate other races, thereby making manliness and civilization attainable only by white men. By establishing this connection, Bederman's work lays the framework for our understanding of how the nineteenth-century discourse regarding civilization is based on the premise of white superiority. Though Bederman does not discuss the exhibition of foreign bodies in the circus or museums, her work establishes the intellectual framework for understanding how the exploitation of foreign bodies as 'uncivilized' fits into the larger discourse regarding contemporary concepts of manhood and civilization. The historiography that informs my study all builds on Bederman's seminal concepts regarding civilization and its connection to American concepts of manliness. Though each work takes a different approach, they all employ Bederman's concepts to discuss their disparate but related subjects.

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Bluford Adams' *E Pluribus Barnum*, published in 1997, builds on Bederman's work by applying her concepts to the history of P.T. Barnum's career as it relates to nineteenth century popular culture. Adams' work is semi-biographical in nature as the author uses the career of P.T. Barnum as a catalyst for a more general discussion of American culture during the mid-nineteenth century. Adams' work discusses the various aspects of American culture that shaped, and were reflected in, P.T. Barnum's public entertainments, however, Adams employs Bederman's foundational ideas in his assessment of Barnum's career as he states, "All of Barnum's circuses and hippodromes celebrated white, bourgeois manhood under the banners of Christianity and Civilization."⁸ The concept of civilization and race are the main topics of Adams' fifth chapter, "A Stupendous Mirror of Departed Empires." This chapter uses Barnum's exhibition of foreign bodies in his, "Congress of Nations," and "Ethnological Congress" to discuss the imperial implications of Barnum's exhibition of non-Western cultures. For Adams, Barnum's show "reduced non-Westerners to 'specimens' in an ethnological schema."⁹ In his assessment of Barnum's "Ethnological Congress," Adams states that the "Ethnological Congress couched its white male supremacy in the vocabulary of objectivity and empiricism."¹⁰ Adams' work establishes the idea that Barnum exploited contemporary ideas of civilization to create performances that played on American male fantasies of white superiority over the 'uncivilized' peoples of the world.

Janet Davis' *The Circus Age: Culture & Society Under the American Big Top*, published in 2002 further builds on Bederman's work by employing her concepts in her assessment of the nineteenth-century American circus. Davis, like Adams, uses the history of the American circus

⁸ Bluford Adams, *E Pluribus Barnum: The Great Showman and the Making of U.S. Popular Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 165.

⁹ Adams, 165

¹⁰ Adams, 180

to investigate myriad topics such as gender, sexuality, race, class, empire, and nationalism at the turn of the century. Basically, Davis finds that as America progressed as a country and gained more status on the global stage, the circus became more and more a reflection of that progress. Further, Davis argues that before mass media, the circus was one of the major outlets for Americans to learn about, and celebrate their country. As such, the author notes that the circus must be understood as an influential cultural form regarding the development of America's social structures, and the growth of the American empire.

Davis directly discusses the relationship between public entertainment and American imperialism as she argues that the circus framed American imperialism as evidence of American exceptionalism, effectively turning empire building into a point of pride and patriotism among the white, American audience. Davis' work does not explicitly employ the language of *Civilization and Manliness*, but her work does exploit its themes as she argues that circuses framed American expansion as providing "moral uplift" to the people and lands the American government sought to colonize.¹¹ Further, Davis argues that circuses often depicted expansion "as part of the nation's 'inevitable movement from 'savagery' to civilization."¹²

Kristin Hoganson's *Fighting for American Manhood* applies Bederman's ideas to her analysis of the many causes of the Spanish American War. Hoganson's work employs a feminist perspective in her analysis of the Spanish-American and Philippine-American wars as the author argues that the many factors that caused the two wars could be traced back to American's concept of manhood.¹³ For Hoganson, scholars have developed many economic, political, and

¹¹ Janet Davis, *The Circus Age: Culture & Society Under the American Big Top* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 194.

¹² Davis, 203.

¹³ Kristin Hoganson, *Fighting for American Manhood: How Gender Politics Provoked the Spanish-American and Philippine-American Wars* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998).

strategic arguments regarding the causes for the two wars, but the foundation of each of these arguments lies in the gender relations of the late-nineteenth century. Hoganson claims that the late-nineteenth century was a volatile time for gender relations as women were beginning to challenge the idea that they were only meant to participate in the private sphere. As society was changing due to industrialization and modernization, women were actively seeking more power in contemporary society. For Hoganson, this led many American men to become obsessive with so-called manliness. At the time, manliness was conceptualized as martial strength and the ability to dominate, so many Americans saw war and conquest as direct evidence of their own manhood. Hoganson's work is somewhat unique in the field of Spanish-American and Philippine-American War history as her book aims to contradict a spectrum of arguments regarding the causes of the war in favor of her much simpler argument; that it all came down to gender politics. Though her argument is simpler, it is also elegant and her book does a great job tracking how the idea of manliness crept into every historical argument regarding the two wars.

Amy Greenberg's *Manifest Manhood and the Antebellum American Empire*, builds upon Hoganson's arguments investigating the role gender played in American expansion West, and eventually overseas.¹⁴ In her analysis, Greenberg focuses on the American concept of Manifest Destiny, or the idea that white, male Americans were destined by God to conquer foreign lands and people. For Greenberg, almost everything about the idea of Manifest Destiny can be traced back to contemporary Americans sense of manhood. For example, women were seen as a civilizing force in nineteenth century America, and, as such, when artists created images that hailed American progress, America was always represented as a woman.¹⁵ Further, like

¹⁴ Amy Greenberg, *Manifest Manhood and the Antebellum American Empire*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

¹⁵ The most famous example of this is John Gast's painting *American Progress*, published in 1872, which depicts America in the form of a woman, gliding across the land, bringing 'civilization' to the western frontier.

Hoganson, Greenberg argues that the western frontier was symbolic of one of the last places where men could be men, therein tying imperialism to ideas of manliness. However, Greenberg's work is wider in scope than Hoganson's, and her work covers a longer time period. Greenberg gives more attention to explaining the way the concept of manhood changed throughout the nineteenth century and how that related to the concept of Manifest Destiny. For Greenberg, eighteenth-century manhood conceptualized a 'man' as leisurely, educated, refined, and moral. However, after industrialization, American's began exhibiting what Greenberg calls "Martial manhood;" the idea that a man was strong, dominant, able to drink to excess, and they "rejected the moral standards that guided restrained men."¹⁶ The author claims that this new kind of manhood crept up as an effect of industrialization as working men became a larger part of the economy. Overall, Greenberg argues that this new sense of martial manhood contributed greatly to public support for American imperialism on the North American continent and abroad. Where Hoganson focuses directly on the issue of manliness during the late-eighteen nineties, Greenberg goes back further linking the idea of manhood to American expansion throughout the antebellum era.

Bonnie Miller's *From Liberation to Conquest* presents the most direct discussion between the imperialist representation in popular culture and its relationship with imperialism. Unlike the aforementioned scholarship, Miller's work is a direct analysis of imagery depicting foreign cultures in the waning years of the nineteenth century.¹⁷ For Miller, in the early years of Cuba's fight for independence, American newspapers depicted Cubans as helpless women who needed to be saved by manly Americans. However, after America won their war against Spain,

¹⁶ Greenberg, 12

¹⁷ Bonnie Miller, *From Liberation to Conquest: The Visual and Popular Cultures of the Spanish-American War of 1898*, (Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2011).

the question of imperialism became a hot topic in American media sources. This caused the imagery of foreign nations to change from helpless women, to uncivilized savage as both sides of the imperialism debate employed long established imagery of foreign people to support their disparate stances. Miller argues that “the cultural production of empire on both sides of the [imperialism] debate made use of popular imagery that circulated widely in mass entertainments, including the attractions of P.T. Barnum.”¹⁸ She goes on to state: “By presenting the terms of overseas imperialism through the lens of American popular culture, cultural producers embedded messages of imperialist and racial ideologies in a framework that could be widely recognized and had mass appeal.”¹⁹ Throughout her work, Miller employs Bederman’s initial concept that the idea of manhood and civilization were deeply intertwined, and she applies this idea directly to her analysis of the various imagery that is relevant to the imperialism debate. However, Miller is alone among the aforementioned scholars to make direct connections between P.T. Barnum, the circus, and American imperialism. Other scholars, like Davis and Adams, also make this connection, but their connections are more vague than Miller’s direct assessment.

My work will add to this scholarship in two ways: first, I will argue that the point of origin of the imperialist representation of island cultures is much earlier than the aforementioned scholarship suggests, and, second, I treat the representation of island cultures as its own, distinct history rather than analyzing the topic as related to American race relations with Native Americans and African Americans. Mixing the histories of island cultures, with the histories of Native Americans and African Americans is absolutely justified. The way island cultures were depicted undoubtedly draws upon racist depictions of both ‘other’ groups. However, by seeing

¹⁸ Miller 189

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the representation of island cultures as only an offshoot of local race relations, one can easily dismiss the fact that the commercialized exhibition of foreign peoples as uncivilized savages has its own history. There is no doubt that these histories are related, but my work will focus more on how representations of Pacific Islanders evolved throughout the nineteenth century rather than assuming that said representations were a latent function of American race relations. By analyzing imperial representations of Pacific Islanders specifically, my work will offer a new perspective that does not disregard the fact that Pacific Islanders were a distinctly different culture than Native Americans and African Americans.

The primary sources that inform my own study include newspaper articles, political cartoons, advertisements, and pictures. I use these sources to build a better understanding of how contemporary Americans discussed foreignness in the public entertainment sector, specifically with regard to island cultures. In the first section, I will establish the changing culture of the mid-nineteenth century that led to the creation of new types of entertainments for the masses. The second section will be a discussion of James O'Connell and his Tattooed Man sideshow. The third section will trace the career of P.T. Barnum, specifically focusing on his exploitation of foreign people. This section will also include the way Barnum's entertainment style infiltrated the World's Columbian Exposition in 1893. The last section will examine the way the imperial representation of island cultures made their way into imperialist propaganda in the years following the Spanish American War.

My work will argue that nineteenth-century American showmen taught the American public how to think about 'civilization' and its relationship to foreignness. Entertainment producers of the nineteenth century are some of the most important and influential figures in establishing the idea that white people are civilized and non-white people are not, and so it is this

group that my work will most directly focus. Although there are many groups of people involved in spreading this narrative, it was circuses and sideshows that brought this narrative into small towns across the country. It was the imagery of the circus that image makers used to gather support for imperialism in the eighteen nineties. Thus, an inspection of how this idea evolved within entertainment culture is necessary for our understanding of the relationship between entertainment and American imperialism.