## James O'Connell, The Tattooed Irishman

In 1836, a man by the name of James O'Connell began performing in theaters around New York as America's first "Tattooed Man:" A show that consisted of O'Connell going on stage and showing off his tattoos while dancing and telling incredible stories of captivity, torture, and tattooing among Native peoples of the South Pacific. By his death in 1854, there were few theaters in New York that O'Connell had not performed his fantasy. This show that seems so strange from a modern perspective leads to many questions: Why did audiences pay to see a man who had been tattooed? How did the theater transition from showing plays, to presenting audiences with a dancing tattooed man? How did a man with tattoos come to see the theater as a possible outlet for work? All of these questions, and more stem from the fact that O'Connell's story seems to be so out of place when one looks back at popular early-American entertainment

forms. However, it is clear when looking at the years preceding O'Connell's show that shipping culture and developments in popular entertainment forms in Europe and America had created an environment where the "tattooed man" performance would make complete sense. The fact that O'Connell's show was successful is not in-and-of-itself important to American history, what is important is the way the sailor popularized depictions of Island cultures. Where some may see O'Connell's show simply as an oddity, or curiosity, I see O'Connell as the first step in presenting working-class American audiences with imperialist depictions of Island cultures as savage, torturous barbarians who were in need of civilization.
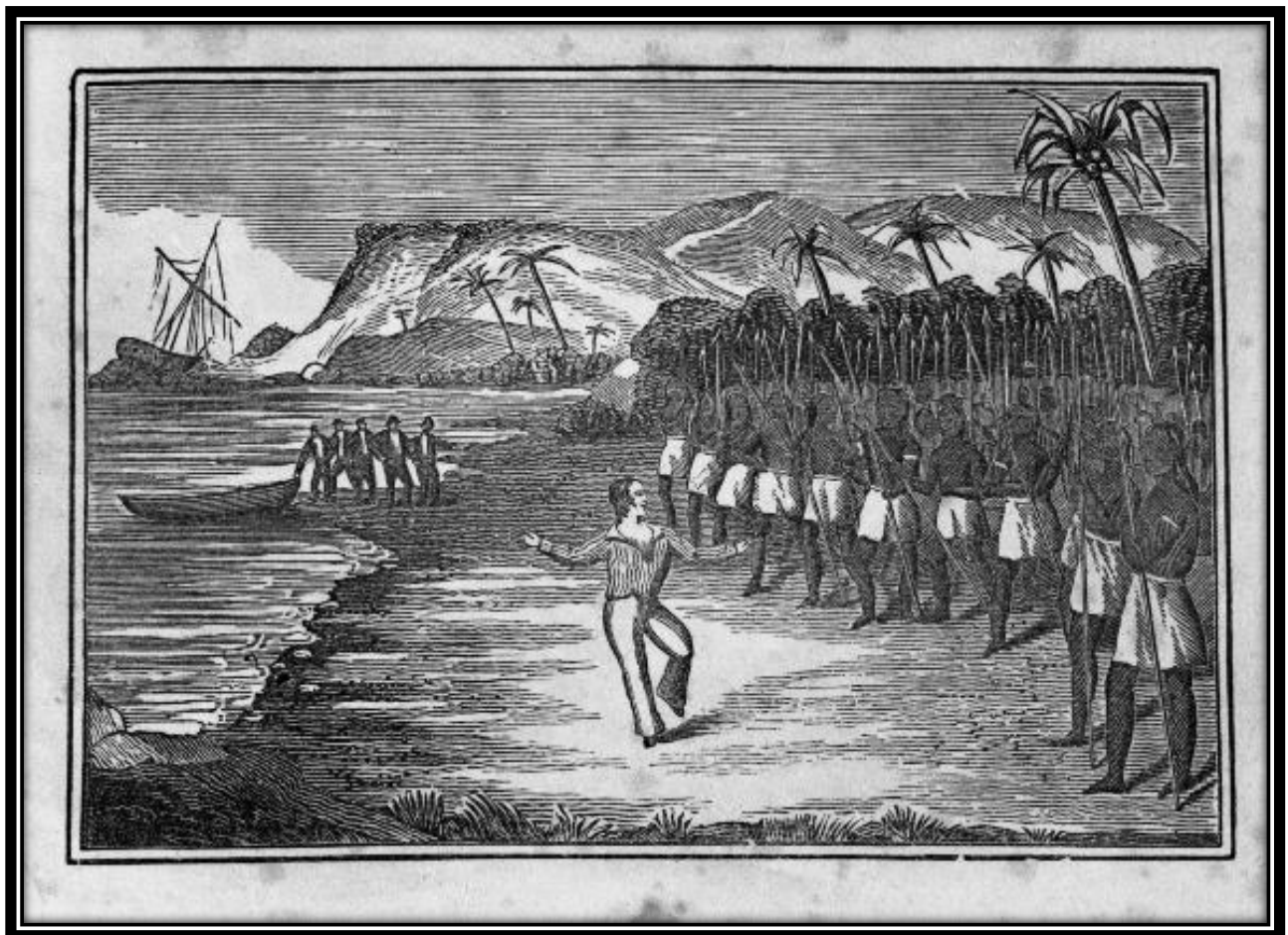
The story of James O'Connell is important in regard to the history of tattooing in popular American culture, to popular entertainment history, and to the history of Americans depicting foreign cultures. However, O'Connell's story is also illuminating with regard to the history of nineteenth century concepts of masculinity, and how the idea of masculinity provided a lens through which Americans came to conceptualize foreign cultures. Historian Amy Greenberg discusses the changing ideas of American masculinity in her work *Manifest Manhood and the Antebellum American Empire*. For Greenberg, the nineteenth century included two different types of masculinity: restrained and martial. Restrained manhood is defined by Greenberg as a man who was educated, morally upright, reliable, and brave, whereas martial manhood is defined as a man who was physically strong, dominating, proud, and morally ambiguous.[1] According to Greenberg, the restrained man was more common among the middle-and-upper class in the early-nineteenth century. However, once industrialization created a new, working class, many more American men were able to participate in the public sphere, and these men were not educated, they were not restrained, and they were not particularly interested in proving how moral they were. Because this new class of men did not have any interest in adhering to the upper-class ideals about manhood, the concept of masculinity itself shifted toward martial manhood. James O'Connell did not begin this trend in any sense, but his story is a perfect example of how nineteenth century ideas of masculinity shaped American concepts of foreign cultures.

O'Connell, and the American tattooed men that came after him, essentially projected ideas of American manhood onto fantastic adventure stories of the white experience in foreign lands. The tattooed man show was a performance that not only provided audiences with a story

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[1] Greenberg 12

involving adventures in the South Pacific, but also a story that provide pseudo-evidence of the superiority of the white man among his "savage" counterparts. By tying the stories of the early tattooed man to examples of foreign "otherness," the tattooed sideshow essentially began a long history of showmen bringing the exotic, faraway island lands, into the familiar, the American city, to show audiences why American culture was superior to that of foreign lands around the world. The act of bringing the exotic into cities to entertain middle and working-class audiences, eventually came to characterize one of the most popular, and influential, entertainment forms in American history: the circus. When the circus began traveling to American cities around the country, the obsession with the foreign "other" had been well established by tattooed sideshows and circus showmen continued the trend into the twentieth century.

Captain James Cook
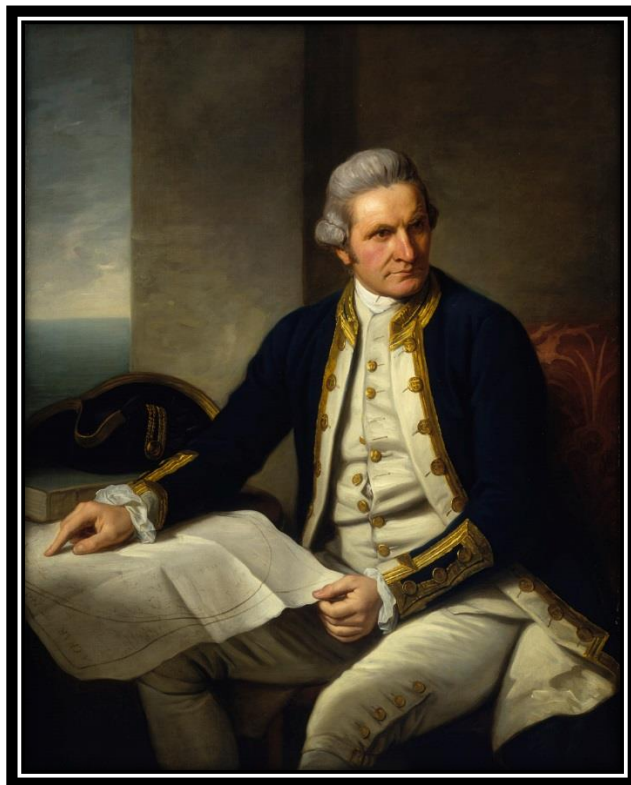
O'Connell was not the first white Westerner to use tattoos as evidence of Pacific Islander's 'barbarism.' Tattooing became popular long before O'Connell, after voyagers began traveling in the South Pacific. One of the most influential voyagers with regard to the history of tattooing in Western culture is Captain James Cook. Cook was a member of the British Navy, and in 1768 the young lieutenant was given the command of the *HMS Endeavour* and sent into the South Pacific on a scientific mission to record the transit of Venus.[2] This mission led Cook to the islands of Tahiti, New Zealand, and other Polynesian islands where he charted the geography of the islands, took note of their flora and fauna and made contact with indigenous populations. Cook's first mission to the Polynesian Islands was so successful that the captain was commissioned to return two more times, in 1772 and 1776, in order to chart the geography of the Islands. During his last voyage, Cook was killed by indigenous Hawaiians for attempting to kidnap a Hawaiian chief.[3]

The journals of James Cook and his naturalist Joseph Banks, entitled *A Journal of a Voyage Round the World in H.M.S. Endeavour 1768-1771,* was eventually published, greatly influencing European scholar's understanding of the geography and landscape of the islands he visited. In total, Cook published three journals that were invaluable to European understanding of the indigenous cultures in the Polynesian Islands.[4] In his journals, Cook writes about his

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[2] James Cook. *A Journal of a Voyage Round the World in H.M.S. Endeavor 1768-1771*. London: Printed for J. Stockdale, Scratcherd and Whitaker, J. Fielding, and J. Hardy, 1769.

[3] DeMello, p. 46

[4] Cook's works were a part of a much larger group of scholarship that focused on studying the foreign customs of "the Orient." For example, William Dampier's *A New Voyage Round the World*, published in 1697, was one of the first popular travel journals that included tales of foreign lands in the South Pacific, Australia, and the Americas. Dampier's work went on to inspire hundreds of Western travelogues over the eighteenth century. In 1771 Abraham Anquetil published *Zend Avesta*, a collection of works that sought to translate the theology and religion associated with Zarathushtra, an ancient prophet at the basis of the religion Zoroastrianism which was practiced in ancient Persia. Also in 1771, Louis Antoine de Bougainville published *Le Voyage Autour du Monde,* a travelogue that described the geography and customs of islands in the South Pacific and South America such as: Argentina, Patagonia, Tahiti, and Indonesia. Further, the late eighteenth century included numerous journals by Christian Jesuit

experiences with the Native populations, expressing a cold ambivalence in his recitation of the

many customs that must have seemed so foreign to the Englishman so far away from home. For

example, when exploring New Zealand the captain was introduced to the Maori custom of

cannibalism, but instead of writing about the custom with disgust or a sense of superiority, Cook

simply notes "Tuesday the 14th…they confirm the custom of eating their enemies so that this is a

thing no longer to be doubted." [5] This kind of objective language can be found throughout Cooks

records of his experience as he discusses, sailing, trading, and living close to the Natives,

however, Cook's journals also include myriad instances of fighting, punishing, and basically

murdering many of the people that they had come across. Thus, the culture of the Polynesians

was noticeably presented to Western audiences through a Western author who only saw

Polynesian culture as it differed from Europe's.

Throughout his journals, Cook continuously presents his story from a colonial

perspective; remarking on the many 'savage' customs of the people whose land he was visiting

while also presenting the value of their lands. For example, Cook states, "It was the Opinion of

every body [*sic*] on board that all sorts of European grain, fruit, Plants, etc., would thrive here; in

short, was this Country settled by an industrious people they would very soon be supplied not

only with the necessaries, but many of the Luxuries, of Life [*sic*]."[6] By remarking on what

foods and plants would grow in the Polynesian environment, Cook is, thereby, acknowledging

the likelihood that Europeans would one day colonize the Islands. Also, there are multiple points

in Cook's journal in which he states that he killed a native for slight crimes like stealing.[7]

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missionaries and other world travelers that sought to tell readers about their experiences in foreign, non-white
cultures.
[5] Cook, p. 126
[6] Cook, Ch. 6 (UNDER NEW ZEALAND)
[7] Ibid

Instead of learning the social rules of the places he visited, and trying to solve his problems through diplomacy, the captain chose to use violence to subdue the local populations and, thus, exert his power to dominate. At the heart of colonialism, one country comes in, destroys local populations so that they cannot fight, and then uses a country's resources for their own gain. In Cook's journals, one can find clear insinuations that these people were ripe for colonization.

Head of Otegoongoon, Son of a New Zealand Chief, the face curiously tataowd.
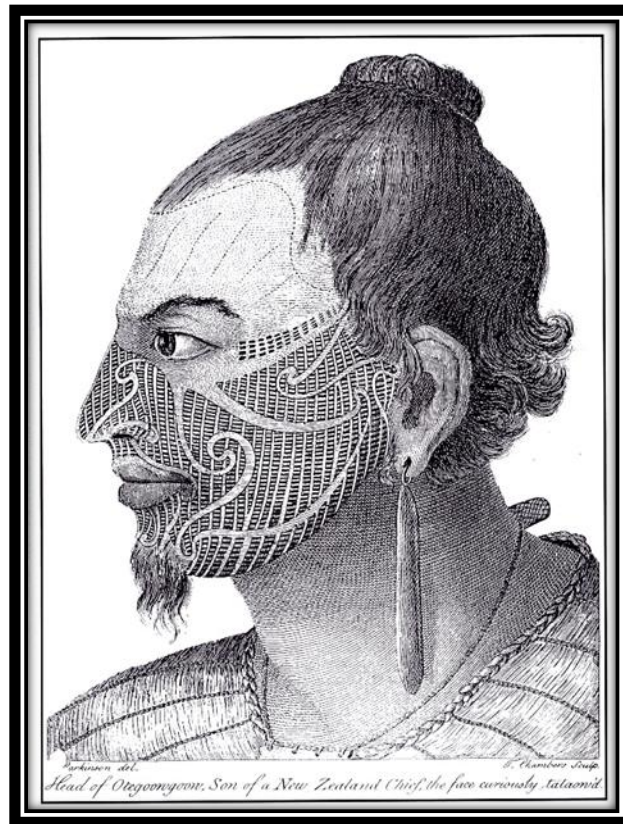
The most important aspect of James Cook's journals to this study lies in the fact that this document is noted to be the first instance of a European using the word tattoo, or "tattoow" as Cook originally wrote it, in reference to permanently marking the body with pigments and designs.[8] In discussing the Maori tradition of tattooing, Cook states, "Both sexes paint their Bodys, [*sic*] Tattow, as it is called in their Language." [9] Cook goes on to describe the methods and tools used by the Maori when applying tattoos. Cook's description of tattooing is relatively accurate, despite the captain seeing the practice as primitive, but Cook's journals were much more important for establishing the word tattoo. Previously, Europeans did not have a word for permanently marking the body with ink despite the fact that the practice had been around for thousands of years, even in European culture. In describing the Polynesian tradition, Cook uses the word "tattow," which was changed to tattoo and is the word that the world still uses today. This has caused some scholars to believe that Cook was the first to "introduce" tattooing into Western culture, but this is inaccurate.[10] Cook may have enhanced Western interest in Polynesian culture and tattooing, but he did not introduce the practice.

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[8] CITE FRIEDMAN

[9] Cook, p. 93. This is inaccurate. The Maori called tattoos Moko, Tatau was the word used by Tahitians. Cook just misspelled it.

[10] List scholars that start with Cook.

In 1774 Captain Cook kidnapped two Polynesian men, named Omai and Tupia, to be put on public display in England, however, he was not the first to understand that Europeans would be interested in seeing a tattooed native.[11] In 1691, a man named Prince Jeoly was enslaved by Spanish voyagers and then purchased by a European businessman to be put on display for the purpose of showing off his tattoos.[12] The man was renamed The Painted Prince, and he was displayed in public places for a short period before he succumbed to smallpox. With Prince Jeoly, and Omai, we have early iterations of putting a tattooed human body on display in Western culture as an oddity, however, the symbolism of a tattooed body was changed

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[11] DeMello, p.48, Omai and Tupia were kidnapped in order to serve as Cook's interpreters and guides. During the voyage home, Tupia died of a disease he contracted during his travels, and Omai spent two years in England being displayed for English high society, including King George III. Omai was popular in England, and is credited as one of the inspirations for Jean-Jacques Rousseau's romantic ideal of the "noble savage:" the idea that the native islander lived a more noble life than the "civilized" Westerner.

[12] Ibid p. 47

dramatically when the performers were white Europeans. With Jeoly and Omai, the tattooed individuals were being presented as live examples of how people lived in foreign lands, with the later white European tattooed men, the individuals were presented as victims of 'savage' customs.

<u>Sailors and Stories</u>

After Cook's voyages to the Polynesian islands, tattooing became much more common among white European sailors. Cook had successfully mapped out much of the geography of the islands, making it an easy stop off point in the South Seas before going to Asia, which caused Europeans to travel to Islands in the South Pacific more frequently. Most of the sailors were merchants, and they came to the islands in order to replenish supplies.[13] As the sailors were not coming to the islands to stay, they did not see a need to learn the customs of the native island cultures. However, the sailors would often participate in different islands tattoo culture as a sort of souvenir of their visit. According to historian Margo DeMello, without this "cross-fertilization," it is unlikely that tattooing would have become a part of Western culture.[14]

There were also many cases of European sailors jumping ship and living amongst the native populations for years. These men, often called beachcombers, did attempt to learn the customs and traditions of Island cultures, leading some of them to accept cultural traditions such as full body tattooing. It is from a beachcomber that the West finds its first "tattooed man" spectacles; Jean Baptiste Cabri and John Rutherford. Rutherford and Cabri had exceptionally

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[13] Greg Dening.. *Islands and Beaches: Discourse on a Silent Land: Marquesas, 1774-1880*. Chicago: Dorsey Press, 1989. p. 23.
[14] DeMello, p. 46

similar stories regarding their tattooing, which later served as the foundations for James

O'Connell's tattooed man show in New York.

Jean Baptiste Cabri was a French sailor who jumped ship and lived among the Marquesan

people for several years.[15] Cabri had taken a wife and had fully accepted the Marquesan

traditions, including getting tattooed all over his body. In 1804, Cabri was discovered by a

Russian explorer, named George H. von Langsdorff, who offered to bring Cabri back to Russia,

which the French deserter accepted.[16] Upon returning to Russia, Cabri began exhibiting himself,

in Russia and Western Europe, telling stories of his time among the "savages." Before Cabri, the

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[15] Gilbert, Steve. *Tattoo History: A Sourcebook*. Juno Books, 2000.

[16] Langsdorff, Georg H. Von. *Voyages and Travels in Various Parts of the World*. London, 1813. Reprinted in Steve
   *Gilbert's Tattoo History: A Sourcebook*. 140.

only tattooed performances in the West were done by actual natives such as Omi and Jeoly, but Cabri brought something new to the show as a white European who told stories of captivity and torture by 'uncivilized' peoples. Cabri's performances did not last long as the Frenchman died in 1812, nor were they particularly successful, but Cabri's narrative of captivity, torture, marriage, and escape became a staple of tattooed man shows for over one hundred years after his death.

Though Cabri only performed in Europe and Russia, by 1824, Polynesian culture, including tattooing, began to be discussed in American media forms. In an article entitled "New Zealand," published in *The North American Review*, the author discusses cultural practices in New Zealand, and the "discoveries" of Captain James Cook. With regard to tattooing, the author states, "Marks were made on the body in commemoration of some single event…They are also employed as the distinguishing badges of tribes."[17] The author goes on to state, "this singular custom has its foundation in purposes of utility, and accomplishes ends which other savages attain in a much ruder, and more imperfect manner."[18] These statements suggest that, while the author is relatively accurately presenting the importance of the tattoo to the Maori, he still conceives the practice of tattooing as a step on the latter of civilization that the "savage" Maori were still climbing. Thus, the tattoo was presented here as a symbol of an uncivilized culture that was slowly becoming civilized.

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[17] "New Zealand." *The North American Review,* vol. 8, no. 43 (April 1824): 349.
[18] Ibid p. 350.
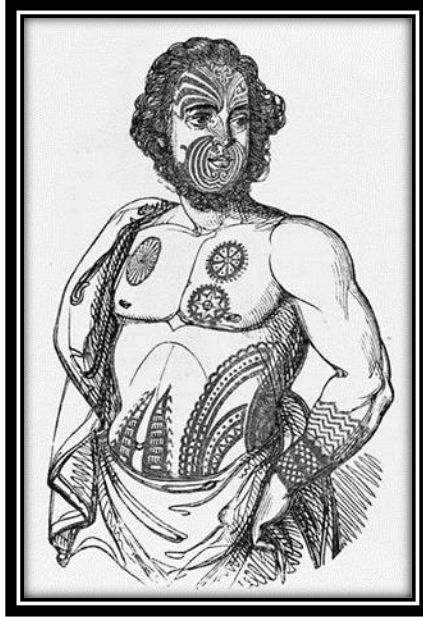
In 1828, another man, named John Rutherford, had returned to Europe after spending years in the Polynesian Islands and subsequently began performing in traveling circuses as "The Tattooed Man." Based on Rutherford's journals, which one must read with some suspicion, Rutherford had been taken captive by Maoris after his ship was ambushed on New Zealand's South East coast.[19] Some of his shipmates were killed, but Rutherford and his comrades that survived were taken captive by a Maori Chief named Aimy.[20] According to Rutherford's journals, after a few days in captivity, Rutherford was tattooed as the sailor states, "The whole of the natives having then seated themselves on the ground in a ring, we were brought into the middle and, being stripped of our clothes, and laid on our backs, we were each of us held down by five or six men, while two others commenced the operation of tattooing us." [21] Now, this depiction of tattooing suggests that the tattoo was forcibly applied, but Rutherford also had

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[19] George Craik. *The New Zealanders*. London: published under the superintendence of the Society for the Diffusion
        of Useful Knowledge. 1833. p.?
[20] Ibid p. 132
[21] Ibid p. 135

tattoos in the Tahitian tradition, suggesting that the sailor likely allowed different cultures to tattoo him as he traveled around the Polynesian islands with the Maori.

Rutherford's account suggests that the Maori adopted the Englishman after the attack on his ship, and he subsequently lived with the Maori for ten years. By his own account, Rutherford accepted Maori culture in order to keep himself alive, took a wife, had children, and lived as a member of the Maori for several years. Rutherford 'escaped' his 'captivity' after making himself known to some European voyagers who stopped in Tahiti, where Rutherford happened to be living at the time. According to Rutherford, the Maori Chief Aimy asked the Beachcomber to lead the visiting vessel into an ambush much like the one that led to Rutherford's 'captivity.'[22] Rutherford, instead, announced himself as a "white New Zealander" and was taken back to England by the ship's captain.[23] Like Cabri, Rutherford's narrative includes torture, adventure, tattooing, and the marriage to a high ranking woman on the island. Also like Cabri's story, Rutherford's tale is most likely a fantastic account of his travels that had a slight basis in reality.[24]

Upon returning to England in 1828, John Rutherford found it hard to find employment due to his extensive face tattoos, so he began making money by traveling the country with the circus. Though Cabri was performing as a tattooed man years before Rutherford, Rutherford was much more popular than his french counterpart. Rutherford's story also marks a progression in the 'tattooed by savages' tale; where Cabri was admittedly a deserter, and, therefore, a representation of dishonorable actions, Rutherford was presented himself as a victim of ambush

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[22] Craik, p.?
[23] Ibid
[24] The reality of Rutherford's account is impossible to know for sure, but historians such as Gell?, DeMello, Gilbert, Parry, and Bogdan all agree that Rutherford's story is heavily dramatized.

and captivity, thereby keeping his honor. Thus, Rutherford's experience was something that was done to him by natives, whereas Cabri's story was something that he had brought on himself. In the end, Rutherford had a hard time making money outside the circus, and he did not enjoy being displayed for money, so the sailor saved up enough money and returned to the Island of Tahiti in 1830, never to return to Europe.[25]

The Development of Working-Class Entertainment

Cabri and Rutherford both returned to the West tattooed and ready to perform for money, but they would never have been able to make money as a living spectacle if the Europeans had not developed a proper platform for their show. The history of the tattooed man show finds its earliest iterations in the history of "freak shows." Beginning in medieval Europe, showmen began traveling from town to town displaying what they called "freaks." Often, these 'freaks' were simply people with deformities, such as missing limbs, dwarfism, or misshaped heads. The public display of these 'freaks' was often its own show, rather than being presented as a part of a larger entertainment apparatus. These 'freaks' would always travel with a showman who would put them on display and tell some fantastic story about where they came from in the name of education. As science and enlightenment thinking had not been established yet, audiences were likely to believe the showmen's story that the person on display was from the moon or had suffered the wrath of God. In the case of the tattooed man, Cabri and Rutherford established the troupe of the victimized sailor who befell the horrible fate of captivity among 'savages.' The story of their tattooing was equally important as the tattoos themselves because these shows were intended to entertain audiences under the guise of educating the public. By the late-eighteenth

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[25] Ibid

century, circuses and dime museums were established to entertain larger audiences, and the showmen who created these entertainment forms simply appropriated long established 'freak shows' as a way to entertain audiences in between their main attractions.

In America, sideshows also predate circuses and dime museums as eighteenth and early-nineteenth century theaters often included sideshow attractions, such as jugglers, orators, dancers, and acrobats, to entertain audiences between acts of theatrical plays. (Levine 33) The theater was, inarguably, the most popular form of entertainment for Americans during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In fact, theater was so popular during the nineteenth century that Americans could often recite Shakespeare from memory, however, the experience of the theater during this time period was much different than what we know today. Before the mid-nineteenth century, the American theater was a place where audiences not only went to see a play, but also to interact with those performing. Often, audiences would hiss or cheer for a particularly popular line in a Shakespearian drama, sometimes the audience would even demand that an actor repeat a popular line of a play. This is also the time period that gave birth to the cliché of audiences throwing vegetables at a bad actor that often pops up in contemporary movies depicting the nineteenth century. Thus, the theater was an experience for the audience, rather than a place where an audience was expected to voyeuristically spectate, which characterizes the theater in the twentieth century.

Further, the nineteenth-century, American theater was a place where class divisions broke down. Though separated by seating, a typical nineteenth century play would have included an audience made up of the working class, the leisure class, and individuals that society deemed undesirable (black people and prostitutes). In essence, the theater was a microcosm of democratic ideals. However, over the course of the nineteenth century, places like New York

City began to industrialize, leading to a larger working class. This relatively new group of Americans could essentially exert more agency in the public sphere due to an increase in disposable income. As both the working class and the leisure class attended the theater at the same time, playhouses effectively turned into contentious spaces where social issues began to influence the experience of a trip to the theater. Although most of the time social anxieties simply caused an audience to be more rowdy than usual, but sometimes it created situations where audiences turned violent and were met with harsh reaction from local authorities.

The best example of class issues causing violent interaction between audiences and police is the infamous Astor Place Riot in 1849. Astor Place was a theater in New York City that was often 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."[26]

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

between those who have been styled the 'exclusives,' or 'upper ten,' and the great popular

masses."[27] 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*."[28]

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

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[26] "Tragedy at the Opera House." *New York Herald*, May 15, 1849.
[27] *New York Herald,* May 12, 1849.
[28] *Philadelphia Public Ledger*, May 16, 1849.

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 as theater managers began to act as gatekeepers regarding what type of content

their specific audiences would prefer to watch. The separation of content depending on class 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.

The important distinction between the newly established, high-class theater and low-class

theater was the level of interaction that was acceptable between the audience and the show. In

high-class theater the audience was expected to sit idly and watch the content without making

much noise, but in the new types of working-class theater the audience was encouraged to

continue the tradition of clapping or cheering for parts of the show that they enjoyed. Part of

working-class entertainment during the second half of the nineteenth century was the

engagement between the audience and the show's content. This is best exemplified by the rise of

P.T. Barnum's American Museum.

P.T. Barnum is perhaps the most successful showman of the nineteenth century, and his

success was deeply rooted in the separation of high and low culture. Like the theater, museums

went through a transition during the mid-nineteenth century in which museum curators were

engaging in a debate over what belonged in a museum. In previous years, museums were simply

collections of "curiosities," in which a visitor could see famous paintings and sculptures right next to wax figures of Native Americans or taxidermized animals.(levine 147) However, in the mid-nineteenth century, curators began to see museums as educational places that served to provide the public with a place they could come learn about refined arts.(Levine 149) Thus, wax figures and stuffed animals disappeared and in their place were plaster copies of ancient Greek sculptures and copies of well-regarded paintings. Ironically, in an attempt to present museum visitors with *real* art, curators filled their museums with copies of famous art pieces. Further, like the high-class theaters, museums became a place one went to look and listen, not touch or question.

In 1841, P.T. Barnum opened his American Museum and immediately began to exploit the public's interest in exhibits that were disappearing from so-called high art museums. Instead of filling his museums with high art, Barnum decided to fill the American Museum with 'curiosities.' Barnum's museum was a collection of modern technology, wax figures, historical artifacts, exotic animals, and human 'curiosities' like Siamese twins, dwarfs, giants, and tattooed men. Rather than simply trying to educate the public, Barnum engaged the public by presenting them with various exhibits that made them decide what was real and what was not. For example, in WHAT YEAR, Barnum exhibited what he called the Feejee Mermaid, 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. Barnum's ability to sell deception, and his knack for advertisement, made him incredibly successful, but it also laid the foundation for a public entertainment form that would be perfect for tattooed men to show off their tattoos and tell stories of captivity and torture among 'exotic' peoples. Barnum's American Museum was not responsible for the creation of spectacle in popular entertainment, he just exploited the changing tides in American culture.

However, his show is a perfect example of how separation of high and low culture led to the creation of public entertainment forms that emphasized spectacle over truth or reality. It was exactly this environment that allowed for America's first tattooed man, James O'Connell, to enjoy a successful career traveling around New York, and telling spectacular stories about his tattooing at the hands of foreign 'savages.'

James O'Connell, The Tattooed Man

James O'Connell was an Irish sailor who traveled to the Carolina Islands in the South Pacific in the late 1820's. In 1835, O'Connell immigrated to the United States of America, tattooed and eager to share his story of captivity and torture on the American stage.[29] These are the only indisputable facts that one can truly trust regarding O'Connell's time in the South Pacific. According to O'Connell's memoir, *The Life and Adventures of James F. O'Connell, The Tattooed Man*, published in 1845, 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.[30] Upon landing in Pohnpei, O'Connell and his surviving shipmates were taken captive 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."[31] 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.[32] This delighted the

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[29] Robert Bogdan. *Freak Show: Presenting Human Oddities for Amusement and Profit*. Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2009. p. 242

[30] James O'Connell. *The Life and Adventures of James F. O'Connell, The Tattooed Man*. New York, NY: W. Applegate, 1845. p. 11
[31] Ibid
[32] Ibid

natives so much that they brought O'Connell and his shipmate George Keenan with them to their village, and then proceeded to tattoo the men as a ceremony of assimilation.[33] Although O'Connell suggests that his tattooing was against his will, he states that he accepted his fate "like a martyr."[34] 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.[35] Though the sailors found the tattooing to be unpleasant, O'Connell states that his 'captors' "continued to treat us with great hospitality and kindness."[36] 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 daughter to marry. As for his shipmate, Kennan was wedded to a wife of "no rank" because of his "unwillingness to submit to the tattooing."[37] O'Connell's narrative goes on to describe his life among the Pohnpeians, including his marriage and the birth of his children. According to O'Connell's memoir, the two sailors were saved after noticing, and subsequently boarding, an American vessel called the *Spy of Salem*, never to return to the island.[38]

Due to the existent scholarship about South Pacific cultures during this time period, it is fair to assume that O'Connell's memoir is relatively accurate regarding his time in Pohnpei. However, the sailor's story also exudes some likely hyperbole (e.g. marrying an island princess, or the whole village being encapsulated by his dancing), but it does provide the reader with some nuanced representation of native peoples and the experience of sailors in foreign lands. For example, he calls his father-in-law a "practical joker," he tells stories of his marital joys and

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[33] Ibid p. 12: For further reading regarding tattooing traditions of South Pacific Islanders, see GELL AND DENNING
[34] O'Connell p. 12
[35] Ibid
[36] Ibid
[37] Ibid p. 14
[38] O'Connell p. 26

troubles, he talks about his children's behavior, he discusses his relationships with other members of the group; basically, O'Connell's recollection of his time in the South Pacific effectively serves to humanize the people that took care of himself and George Keenan. In Fact, O'Connell never refers to himself as a captive, rather, he paints himself as an outsider who was fully accepted by, and assimilated into, Pohnpeian culture. The sailor's only direct 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 considered himself."[39] This statement infers some complexity regarding the relationship between the shipwrecked sailor and the Island Chief, for O'Connell sees him as a friend but also acknowledges his status as a subject of the Chief. O'Connell further complicates his relationship with the Pohnpeians as he 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." The author goes on to state "Some people claiming to be civilized might take a lesson from the humanity of these people to shipwrecked mariners."[40] Thus, O'Connell's memoirs present the reader with a story of a man who befell horrible circumstances (shipwreck), but was taken in by a group of native island peoples. The memoirs also suggest that, although O'Connell was used to a different lifestyle, he found the Pohnpeians to be hospitable and fair. Further, O'Connell's story offers complex representations of the native culture rather than one-dimensional caricatures that would become common in island adventure stories during the second half of the nineteenth century.

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[39] O'Connell p.12

[40] *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.

To be clear, O'Connell's memoir is deeply problematic regarding how the sailor discussed the native population. O'Connell constantly refers to the natives as savages, compared nearby natives of New Holland (Australia) to Apes, constantly discussed a fear that some of the natives were going to eat him and/or his crew, emphasized the native's lack of 'civilization' as compared to Europeans, called his own children "demi-savages," and implied that he was sexually involved with many of the women on the island. [41] The sailor also took great pains to portray himself as the most clever, bravest, manliest man on the island. Thus, one cannot look at O'Connell's memoir as some sort of enlightened document that portrays a foreign culture with a sense of objective equality, but, instead, it should be seen as a relatively honest document that depicts a man's time within a culture that he could not fully understand. However, the complexity and nuance present in O'Connell's memoir was slowly stripped from the sailor's story as it was retold in American newspapers and upon the American stage.

Upon O'Connell's arrival in 1836, the *Boston Galaxy* published an article about his 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."[42] The author goes on to state, "he 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."[43] This depiction of O'Connell's experience was clearly included to inspire a sense of danger and drama, but it does not match O'Connell's statement that he knew the Pohnpeians "meant us no harm."[44] Here, from the outset

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[41] Ibid p. 8
[42] Adventures on the south seas
[43] Ibid
[44] O'Connell find page

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 process of *tattooing,* which is not a useless proceeding, but is a *history of the various chiefs of the nation.*"[45] 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 mild compared to how O'Connell's story changed over the course of his career as a sideshow performer. What was originally a story of shipwreck and life among a foreign island culture became a story of captivity and torture at the hands of brutal savages.

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. James O'Connell, "The Tattooed Man," began performing in 1840 as a sideshow for theatrical plays in New York theaters. In August of 1840, The New York Herald published an advertisement for the 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."[46] Notably, there is no description of his show, simply a statement that he is tattooed and will appear. By 1842, O'Connell began working with P.T. Barnum's American Museum as a sideshow act. Promoting this show on the 22nd of November, the advertisement states, "Mr. O'Connell, The Tattooed Man, will appear in his

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[45] "Adventures on the South Seas." *Charlotte Journal (Charlotte N.C.)*, December 2, 1836.
[46] *New York Herald*, August 24, 1840.

celebrated dances, and give an historical account of his sufferings for eleven years, while a

prisoner in the hands of barbarous savages."[47] An ad for O'Connell's show at the Amphitheater

in New York less than a week later mimics Barnum's dramatization as it states, "O'Connell…is

to appear and exhibit the extraordinary dance that once saved his life while in captivity amongst

the savages."[48] Clearly, O'Connell had made a name for himself due to his talents as a dancer,

his tattoos, and his unique story, but, by 1842, it is also notable that show managers, or

O'Connell himself, were beginning to add their own flair to O'Connell's story so that it seemed

more dramatic.

Throughout the 1840's, O'Connell enjoyed a successful career as a performer who

danced for the crowd, then told the audience about his time in the South Pacific. Like the ads

from 1842, an ad 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."[49] Thus, for over seven years

the tattooed man's show did not change much. He was paid to go on stage, dance, and discuss

his time among "the savages." The rhetoric of his advertisements did not change over this time

period either, so one can assume that this marketing strategy was perfectly successful in the

1840s for O'Connell's tattooed man show.

By the 1850s the rhetoric of O'Connell's theater advertisements changed dramatically.

One can glean the nature of these rhetorical changes through an analysis of an article from 1852

that was meant to advertise O'Connell's performance as a part of the "Star Spangled Circus."

O'Connell had started traveling with a circus later in his career, and in 1852 his show was being

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[47] *New York Herald*, November 22, 1842.
[48] *New York Herald*, November 28, 1842.
[49] *New York Herald*, October 21, 1849.

performed in New Orleans. An article in the Daily Crescent from September 13th, 1852 gives an illuminating description of O'Connell's experience in the Caroline Islands as a way to advertise O'Connell's show: "He found the Island inhabited by a set of heathen Indians, and 'salvage [*sic*] men,' unacquainted with the common decencies and amenities of civilized life, and as apt to gobble him up without basting or roasting, as they would a lizard or snail."[50] The article goes on to suggest that to escape being eaten by the "cannibal islanders," O'Connell "devised a plan to cheat the barbarians."[51] After seeing the "inhuman antics of the savages waiting to receive him," O'Connell decides to dance a jig.[52] According to this version of the story, the natives loved the dance so much that they accepted the shipwrecked O'Connell, but "His companions, as a matter of course, were eaten."[53] O'Connell was subsequently married to "the King's favorite daughter," but not before they "made O'Connell 'one of em' by 'tattooing' him after the style of the 'salvages' [*sic*] To do this, they in a manner flayed Jemmy alive, pricked holes in his body with sharp thorns," and added liquids that made the sailor look "very much like the zebra." According to the article, "Jemmy" O'Connell escaped after living with "these 'people'" for so long that their lifestyle became unbearable, and visions of his "quiet cottage beyond the billowy deep" became so strong that he chose to leave the island. Apparently, O'Connell escaped after he found a "white settlement" on the island and returned to America to perform in the circus.

This incredibly xenophobic version of O'Connell's story perfectly exemplifies how his narrative changed over the course of his career. According to his own memoirs, O'Connell was shipwrecked and taken in by the native peoples who treated him kindly and with hospitality. He even mentions being happily married, and becoming a father. O'Connell's memoirs never

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[50] *Daily Crescent* (New Orleans), September 13, 1852.
[51] Ibid
[52] Ibid
[53] Ibid

mention captivity, torture, or the Pohnpeians eating anyone (though the memoir does consistently infer other native groups were cannibals). However, by 1852, this story had become a horrific tale of survival among childlike, inhuman, uncivilized, barbarous, savages. Early advertisements for O'Connell's spectacle clearly show that he discussed his experience among the Pohnpeians as a part of his performance, but they also show that his dance was the main attraction. This article from the end of his career, in 1852, paints a much different picture of a man taking the stage and telling of the dangers that await anyone who meets the terrible fate of being stranded on an island with "savages." If the 'barbarous savages" don't eat you, they will definitely torture you by applying a tattoo. Clearly, by the end of O'Connell's career, showmen had turned his relatively hyperbolic adventure story of shipwreck and life among the Pohnpeians into a full-blown exaggeration that emphasized xenophobic implications about foreign island cultures.

O'Connell's story changed over time, but what is most important is that the later version of the story was the one that was remembered and mimicked by tattooed sideshow men that followed. For example, in his memoirs, O'Connell states that he basically bit his lip and endured his tattooing "like a martyr," but, due to the changes in his story over the course of his career, here is how his story was memorialized in print:

Tattooing of O'Connell and Keenan.

"With a sudden blow from a stick she drove the thorn into my flesh; one needs must when the devil drives, so I summoned all my fortitude, set my teeth, and bore it like a martyr."—Page 38.

As one can see in this picture, O'Connell is surrounded by bare-chested Pohnapeian women who are gazing maliciously at the sailor's misfortunes. O'Connell's hands are being held behind his back by one woman while another performs the tattooing, therefore implying the tattooing was physically forced. In the background, one can see the George Keenan meeting a similar fate. The look on O'Connell's face is one of agony as he undergoes his tattooing. On Keenan, the look is one of fear. Underneath this image, Howe quotes O'Connell's narrative, stating that he "bore it like a martyr." This image suggests that, either by O'Connell's choosing or by the sheer nature of fiction, by 1855 the sailor's story had progressed far passed a tale in

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[54] Henry Howe. Tattooing of O'Connell and Keenan, Block Print, c.1855. It is not clear where this print was originally published, but Henry Howe was an author who specialized in histories of Americans at home and abroad. One can assume this print was intended to be a part of one of his books, but it was never actually published.

which he was tattooed by "beauties."[55] Arguably, the nature of entertainment, namely the need to constantly present audiences with more spectacular content, molded O'Connell's show into what is being depicted here. At first, O'Connell was donning the stage, dancing, and telling the audience of the "customs and manners" of the people he lived with while abroad. By the time of O'Connell's death in 1854, his story had obviously changed to emphasize the 'barbarous and savage' nature of his 'captors.' Where his tattoo was first a relic of life among foreign people, it later became a symbol of the dangers one might find in foreign island cultures due to the native's 'brutal,' 'savage' practices. Unfortunately, it was this model that characterized the tattooed man sideshows in the years that followed O'Connell's career.

HERE CONCLUSION ABOUT UNDERSTANDING THE CHANGES TO O'Connells show in the context of changes in the American theater.

However, as mentioned previously, the theater was going through major changes near the end of the 1840s, where shows were becoming more tailored to specific audiences based on class. Whereas O'Connell would have been performing for all classes of people in the 1840s, by the 1850s his style of show was tailored for a working-class audience. Performances like plays were relegated to upper-class theaters, but shows that emphasized exotic people or things were relegated to the working-class entertainment forms like the circus, dime museums, and theaters that put on variety shows.

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[55] Memoir Find Page

Over time, O'Connell's show became more dramatic, which is exemplified by in this 1855 block print by author Henry Howe; a year after O'Connell's death.

MAP

The first platforms that O'Connell found to perform were American theaters and circuses in lower Manhattan, in 1838.[56] Manhattan was effectively the heart of the American entertainment industry in the early nineteenth century. The New York borough was home to a variety of playhouses and popular entertainment forms such as Niblo's Garden, Barnum's American Museum, The Old Bowery Theater, Abbey's Park Theatre and many other theaters where working-class audiences went to be entertained. As one can see in the maps provided in Figure #, as the city's population grew, more and more theaters were built to accommodate New Yorkers in the southern part of Manhattan. In fact, in the nineteenth century alone, over 40 theaters were built within a three-mile radius in Manhattan. These were the theaters where P.T. Barnum presented his first humbugs and oddities, where Jenny Lind went on her famous singing tour, where Fanny Kemble made her first theatrical tour of the U.S., essentially, these theaters are where American popular culture was born. It was also in these theaters that a tattooed sailor named James O'Connell would perform his Island fantasy for audiences eager to hear about life in the South Pacific.

Unlike Cabri and Rutherford, O'Connell spent over almost two decades touring the theater circuit as well as performing in the circuses of P.T. Barnum and Dan Rice. The Tattooed

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[56] FIND THAT GODDAMN CITATION

Irishman enjoyed a long, and successful career in New York up until his death in 1854. Now, it has been established that O'Connell was not the progenitor of the "tattooed by savages" narrative, but the Irishman was the first to bring the story to American shores. To be clear, O'Connell's show is not some starting point for racism against indigenous cultures in America, but his show does exemplify early American ideas of imperialism against Island Natives who lived outside the North American continent.

Conclusion

The depictions and assumptions of Island people as savages in need of civilization stems from Western culture's colonial disposition when interacting with peoples and cultures that they did not understand. Those with the power to travel (the voyagers) visited islands of people they had no interest in learning about, but, rather, who they saw as simply inhabiting the land that they could exploit to make money. As the voyagers held the power to travel and explore, they also held the power to shape the discourse about Island people and culture. When this power turned into words in the form of journals, the ideas of island people as savages was thus disseminated into Western society at large. As these men saw the native populations from a colonial perspective, the traditions and cultures of South Sea Islanders were perceived as savage, in need of destruction to make way for civilization. One particular example of this was tattooing. Tattooing was seen as an example of island people's barbarism, and the symbols that meant so much to the island cultures were subsequently taken back to the West as an example of native savagery. This may have been harmless and ineffective, but this happened at a time when the commodification of theatrical performance and spectacle was beginning to take hold in the West, especially in England and America. Once the tattoo was introduced to a growing new class of people hungry for popular entertainment forms, the island culture's symbols of rank, religion,

and military prowess were turned into symbols of torture and atavism. What one can see in the early tattooed sideshows is, thus, a growing sentiment in America that island people are brutal and in need of civilization. This idea would continuously be used by pro-imperialist Americans throughout the nineteenth century.