

Introduction

P.T. Barnum's American Museum caught fire in July of 1865, burning much of the showman's collection of exhibits, and killing many of the animals that were housed in the museum.¹ Barnum was almost ruined financially, the fire caused an estimated \$1,000,000 of damage, yet, instead of rebuilding the museum, he chose to take his show on the road as a circus called "The Best and Greatest Show on Earth."² Barnum's travelling circus visited cities all over the country, bringing the showman's unique spectacle to millions. As part of this traveling spectacle, Georg Costentenus, "The "Tattooed Man," traveled the country showing off his 'Oriental' tattooing at the hands of "savages."³ For over twenty years, Costentenus enjoyed fame and fortune as one of Barnum's circus "freaks." However, Costentenus is one of the last successful tattooed men to perform in the circus sideshow. By the late 1890s, it was tattooed women who audiences came to see.

In 1882, Bunnell's museum in New York exhibited the first "Tattooed Lady" sideshow in America.⁴ Within a decade, women had almost completely supplanted men as the most popular tattooed attractions. Typically, these women would take the stage with their body covered, then they would take off whatever outer layer they were wearing to reveal their bare skin, full of tattoos.⁵ In nineteenth-century-Victorian society, a woman wearing something as revealing as pants was considered scandalous, so women on stage showing their bare skin brought with it an

¹ "Disastrous Fire." *The New York Times*, July 14, 1865.

² Ibid

³ "Mr. P. T. Barnum's New and Only Greatest Show on Earth." *The Grange Advance*, (Red Wing, Minn), July 11, 1877. Also: "New and Greatest Show on Earth." *The Sedalia Weekly Bazoo* (Sedalia, Mo.), September 18, 1877. Also: "New and Only Greatest Show on Earth." *The State Journal* (Jefferson City, Mo.), September 21, 1877.

⁴ "The Tattooed Woman." *The New York Times*, March 19, 1882.

⁵ Osterude p.33

element of forbidden sexuality which played well to working-class, male audiences. Women such as Nora Hildebrandt, Irene Woodward, Mary Baum, and Annie Howard took the opportunity to enter the public entertainment industry and make money as tattooed sideshow attractions. Like the theatre, the circus gave women the opportunity to make money for themselves at a time when it was uncommon for women to work in most other industries. To ensure the public did not look at these women as unsavory people who threatened the wholesome, family circus, Barnum and others emphasized the manners, and ladylike qualities of their tattooed sideshow attractions.⁶ Although most of the women who performed were of the working-class, the tattooed lady was always presented as a society woman. Thus, the tattooed lady took the tattoo from a place of insinuated criminality and savagery, and made it a mark of exotic reverence. The attraction of the tattooed lady was not some story of shipwrecks and savages, although many of them did continue to use the well-established trope, the real attraction was seeing supposed high-class women taking off their clothes and showing their heavily marked skin.

The late-nineteenth century is an era of major change in American society. Americans began to accept tattooing among a greater portion of society, women were exerting agency and beginning to participate more actively in the public sphere, showmen began to capitalize on the objectification of women in public spectacle, and Americans were developing their own tattoo traditions rather than replicating tattooing traditions of foreign cultures. Moreover, as tattooing became more popular among Americans, the symbolism of tattoos among the American populace also shifted. Tattoos in the early sideshows were done in the Polynesian or Asian tradition, but by the late-nineteenth century, men and women were taking the stage in a distinctly

⁶ Osterude p.43

American style, with tattoos that expressed American patriotism. However, the imagery of island cultures as childlike, uncivilized, barbaric, savages continued in American media sources, especially when considering foreign cultures that Americans had an interest in colonizing. In 1898, America officially went to war with Spain after a long propaganda campaign in American media sources that use the same imagery and insinuations that were present in the earliest years of the tattooed sideshows.

Tattooed Ladies

The first recorded woman to perform on stage as a “Tattooed Lady” was a woman named Irene Woodward.⁷ “La Bella Irene” was originally from Texas, but she travelled to New York to perform as a tattooed woman after seeing Captain Costentenus perform in Barnum’s circus in Denver, Colorado.⁸ Woodward’s debut was at the Sinclair House hotel where she stood on a platform dressed in a revealing outfit that showed off her tattoos and took questions from the audience regarding her tattooing. Irene also connected her tattooing to Native Americas, as she told audiences that she was tattooed by her father so that she would not be kidnapped by Native Americas.⁹ Like the tattooed men that came before her, Woodward published a narrative, entitled *Facts Relating to Irene Woodward, The Tattooed Lady*, which detailed her time on the frontier and the event of her tattooing. In her narrative, Irene suggests that her father began tattooing her and she liked it so much that she implored him to continue until she was covered.¹⁰

⁷ Some sources hold that Nora Hildebrandt was the first tattooed lady performer, but Osterud’s work finds that Woodward beat Hildebrandt to the stage by a mere two weeks. Neither, however, were the first tattooed woman to be publicly displayed in America. That title goes to Olive Oatman. A thirteen-year-old Olive Oatman was travelling on the frontier with her Mormon family when her traveling party was attacked by Yavapai native Americans. Most were killed but Olive was taken into captivity. While in captivity she was tattooed on her chin as a form of assimilation. Oatman’s story was a national sensation, and the book written about her captivity sold over thirty thousand copies. For more information on Oatman, see: CITE BOOKS

⁸ Osterud 37

⁹ *Facts Relating to Irene Woodward, The Tattooed Lady*

¹⁰ *Facts Relating to Miss Irene Woodward, the Only Tattooed Lady,*”

In 1887 a Kansas paper printed an advertisement for Irene Woodward that stated, “Mrs. Woodward was tattooed by her father, Capt. Woodward...making his daughter literally a living picture.”¹¹ This, effectively, takes power away from Native American captors, and places the power in the tattooed woman’s agency. She chose to be tattooed, rather than being forced. Woodward subverted the male dominated tattooed sideshow, keeping the tattoo and the association of tattooing with native peoples, but her show was the first to leave behind the negative fantasies, and symbolism, of captive torture among Native peoples. Woodward began performing on a consistent basis in Bunnell’s Dime Museum, where she went to work after arriving in New York in 1882, but throughout her career she would perform in many cities across America and Europe.¹²

By the late 1880s, tattooed men had been performing in theatres, dime museums, and circuses for over four decades, each with their own story of captivity and torture. Obviously, part of this type of show included men taking off their clothes so that the audience could get a good look at the remnants of savage torture in the form of tattoos. Men did not have to adhere to the same standards as women, so going in public and showing off large parts of their unclothed body was never mentioned by social critics. However, by the 1880s, women began participating in tattooed sideshows, taking the stage in short skirts, and low-cut shirts to best present their tattoos to the audience. This led to many comments by journalists and advertisements regarding the women’s beauty, purity, and body shape.¹³ It quickly became clear to showmen that the sexualized female body was a bigger draw than hardened male ex-sailors. However, as social mores dictated that women were held to different standards, the tattooed women sideshow was

¹¹ “Museum.” *The Wichita Daily Eagle*, Friday, December 2, 1887.

¹² IBID

¹³ “A Tattooed Lady.” *The Memphis Daily Appeal*, Sunday, March 11, 1883.

changed in significant ways that reflected the gender norms of contemporary society. Many of the women also told stories of captivity, but they were much more upfront about their show being a farce than the tattooed men that came before them. By openly admitting that the story was a lie, women were able to keep the socially necessary idea that they were pure, while at the same time making use of the well-established connection of tattooing with foreign torture.

Many other tattooed women followed Woodward's seminal performances in New York. A woman named Nora Hildebrandt, began performing as a "tattooed lady" in New York in the same year as Woodward, telling audiences that her and her father were taken captive by Sitting Bull, an incredibly famous warrior of the Lakota Sioux during the nineteenth century.¹⁴ Her "father" was actually her husband, Martin Hildebrandt, who was a successful tattooist in New York during the late-nineteenth century.¹⁵ A woman named Mary Baum began performing as a tattooed lady, and she openly told the press that she "was tattooed a year ago...the tattooing was done publicly in the Bowery in New York."¹⁶ Annie Howard began performing as a tattooed lady in 1885, telling audiences that she was tattooed after being shipwrecked in the South Pacific, however, a pamphlet published by her husband Frank (who performed alongside her as her brother) states that "Howard had his partner [business] tattoo him from head to foot," and as for Annie, "she coaxed her brother to start and tattoo her person all over."¹⁷ Clearly, these women used the established captivity stories in their performances, but they were much more open about their choice to become tattooed. Thus, these women represent a change in the tattooed sideshow

¹⁴ Custer and Wild Bill Cody show

¹⁵ Osterude 57

¹⁶ Tattooed lady

¹⁷ Frank Howard p. 9

in which the adventurous story of captivity and torture took a back seat to the sexualized body of the female performers.

Unlike the tattooed men sideshows, the physical appearances of the tattooed women were almost always referenced or discussed by their shows and advertisements. For example, after Hildebrandt began performing, one critic stated, “Her face is so hard that you wonder they ever got the needles through her skin.” In an 1882 interview with Mary Baum a journalist met the tattooed woman who subsequently showed him her tattoos, leading to the author’s statement, “this unusual degree of nudity was not so shocking as might be expected, for the rather shapely limbs and bosom, so freely displayed, were covered with a fine network of tattooing.” In 1883, an article about Irene Woodward’s performance includes the statement “She is nineteen years old, educated, refined and very winning in her manners...She appears on the platform in bodice and trunk...the arms, lower limbs and neck are displayed...the sight is an unusually beautiful one.”¹⁸ Clearly, the display of the female form was a major part of the tattooed lady sideshow whereas beauty and form were hardly discussed when media forms were discussing tattooed men. With men, the important part of the show was the adventurous story of captivity and torture. With women, the emphasis was on the women’s beauty and manners.

Further, the women who were tattooed were done so in a distinctly American tradition. Tattooed ladies were often covered with patriotic tattoos that related to America in some way, whereas the tattooed men that came before them were mostly tattooed in traditions from foreign lands. Thus, tattooed women represent the moment when tattooing became American in dime museums and circus sideshows. These women were not going on stage to show off tattoos from

¹⁸ 1883 Irene Woodward

a foreign culture, they were taking the stage to show off the work that was being done by American tattooists. Effectively, when women began performing as tattooed ladies in sideshows, tattooing went through a transition from savage torture, to beautiful, American marks on female bodies.

By the 1890s, tattooed women had almost completely replaced the tattooed man sideshow. Costentenus was at the end of his career, but women like Woodward and Howard were having great success traveling the country and showing audiences the marks of their subversion. The popularity of these shows was arguably due to the act of showing skin, but the 1890s also included a boom for the tattooing industry, especially in the working-class male demographic.¹⁹ In 1891, Samuel O'Reilly invented the tattoo gun, an electric machine that made tattooing faster and less painful.²⁰ This made tattooing easier, leading to more tattoo artists and more young men who were seeking to show off their masculinity by marking their bodies with tattoos. As an article from 1891 states, "Several years ago every person of the irresponsible age considered it absolutely necessary to bare at least one indelible picture on his skin."²¹ The author goes on to suggest that the most popular tattoos were "patriotic in nature," such as "the American and Cuban flags intertwined...[lady] Liberty...the stars and stripes...[and] an American eagle." However, the article also states that "it is not at all uncommon for a man to bring in a design of a crest or coat of arms to be tattooed...Other persons are tattooed after the death of a relative, or the birth of a child, or to commemorate some fortune or misfortune." Thus, by the 1890s tattooing had been appropriated by white Americans as a symbol of masculinity, status, commemoration, patriotism, or religious beliefs. Indeed, this development made tattooing in

¹⁹ "The Art of Tattooing." *The Roanoke Times*, Saturday, December 19, 1891.

²⁰ Samuel O'Reilly. Tattooing Machine. US Patent 464,801 filed December 8, 1891.

²¹ "The Art of Tattooing."

America quite similar to the way tattooing traditions were practiced by cultures in the South Pacific. Ironically, some Americans had come full circle, first presenting tattooing as evidence of foreign savagery, and then, eventually, mirroring the social implications that tattooing held for island cultures. To add more irony, it was the Spanish American War, and America's military engagement in foreign, island lands during the late 1890s that inspired the largest boom in tattooing among white Americans during the nineteenth century.

The story of European Americans during the nineteenth century is a story of expansion. In fact, in 1893, historian Fredrick Jackson Turner published his infamous Frontier Thesis, claiming that American history is a history of the moving frontier.²² Since landing on the eastern coast of mainland North America, Euro-Americans engaged in constant expansion westward until the continental United States touched both the Atlantic and the Pacific oceans. In completing what contemporaries called America's manifest destiny, and successfully stealing almost all Native American lands, Americans began looking outside the continental United States for lands that were ripe for American expansion and colonization. Unfortunately, the islands closest to the American mainland, Cuba and Puerto Rico, were already colonies of Spain. However, in Cuba, there was a growing resistance to Spanish rule, providing Americans with a perfect excuse to engage in imperialism on the world stage.²³

Conflict in Cuba began in 1895 after the Spanish government failed to institute some reforms that were agreed upon after Cuba's Ten Years War against Spain. General Máximo Gómez, the leader of the Cuban resistance, promptly called for all-out war against the Spanish until Cubans won their freedom. Part of Cuba's military strategy for resistance was to burn

²² Fredrick Jackson Turner. "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," Speech, American Historical Association, Colombia World's Fair, Chicago, Ill. July 12, 1893.

²³ "Spain Dislikes Truth." *New York Times*, Apr 24, 1898.

many of the plantations and other symbols of colonization. This left many Cubans without food or shelter. Spain's reaction to Cuba's cries for independence was dually harsh and swift. General Valeriano Weyler was appointed to suppress the Cuban insurrection. Weyler instituted what he called the Reconcentración policy, separating the island into war zones and housing Cubans in fortified camps. Weyler did not have the means to feed or properly house the mass of Cubans who were forced into the Spanish camps, which led to the starvation and death of thousands. The dire situation in Cuba provided the American press with an opportunity to frame Cuba's resistance as an honorable fight for freedom, similar to America's Revolutionary War.

Beginning in the early years of the Cuban revolt, American media sources began printing sensationalized articles and political cartoons that were meant to incite support for American involvement in Cuba. Key among the progenitors of sensationalistic coverage of the Cuban conflict was William Randolph Hearst's *New York Journal*, and Joseph Pulitzer's *New York World*. These men were not the only influential newspaper owners to participate in this era of "yellow journalism,"²⁴ as many newspapers and magazines across the country took a stance either for or against the conflict, however, these newspapers were some of the most influential in garnering support for the war by turning events in Cuba into a public spectacle.²⁵

For two years, Americans were bombarded with imagery and news that presented audiences with arguments for and against American involvement in Cuba, but Americans were not overly swayed one way or another. However, in February of 1898, an American ship named the USS Maine was sunk in Havana while protecting American interests in Cuba, thereby giving pro-war journalists a watershed moment that garnered public support for American military

²⁴ Explain Yellow Journalism and list some books for further reference

²⁵ Miller 11

action against Spain. The USS Maine was apparently sunk after an explosion on the boat, but newspaper men like Hearst and Pulitzer used the event to blame Spain and inspire American support for war. Americans were told that the Spanish had torpedoed the boat, leading to the infamous American war slogan “Remember the Maine, to hell with Spain!” America promptly declared war against Spain in April of 1898. Though many, including the Spanish, believed the American military would first focus on Cuba, the leader of the American navy, General Dewey, decided to launch a sneak attack on the Philippines, another one of Spain’s colonies. Due to the surprise of the attack, America quickly routed the Spanish in Manilla, taking control of the island. The U.S. Navy subsequently attacked the Spanish military in Puerto Rico and Cuba. In its entirety, the Spanish American War lasted less than a year, but America’s “splendid little war” became a popular event that incited strong feelings of American nationalism.

For years leading up to the Spanish American War, American war propaganda used imagery that played to American’s sense of masculinity. America was often portrayed as the Uncle Sam figure coming to the rescue of a female embodiment of Cuba. When America quickly won the war against the Spanish, the event was used as an example of the exceptional strength of the American people. In the months leading up to the war, events that projected feelings of American nationalism and masculine strength were a major draw for American audiences. In March of 1898, less than a month before war was officially declared, New York held a military parade that included a “wall-scaling exhibition, a rough-riding exhibition...sword contest”²⁶ and a presentation of artillery used by the American military.²⁷ This event also

²⁶ Rough-riding refers to exhibitions of skill on horseback.

²⁷ “The Garden Tournament.” *New York Times*, Mar 19, 1898.

included a rendition of “The Star-Spangled Banner,” which had not yet become the nation’s national anthem.²⁸

Even after the war, the famous events, people, and battles of the war were used by media and entertainment sources to incite feelings of American pride, patriotism, and nationalism. For example, after the war, General George Dewey, who had been a major part of the successful war campaign against Spain, was lionized in American media sources. According to a New York Times article from 1899, upon Dewey’s return from the war, serving Governor of New York, Theodore Roosevelt, declared a state-wide holiday in New York for “General Thanksgiving.”²⁹ News sources around the country also wrote stories of the heroic actions of General Dewey during the war, turning the General into a national celebrity. In fact, according to an article from December of 1898, entitled “Dewey on their Left Arms,” the general’s face became a popular tattoo for particularly patriotic Americans.³⁰

Buffalo Bill Cody and the Creation of Entertainment Patriotism

One of the greatest sources of American nationalism in the popular entertainment industry was Buffalo Bill’s Wild West Show. William Cody, or “Buffalo Bill,” was a famous frontiersman who had come to fame due to his military prowess against Native Americans, but he became truly famous when he started an equestrian show that presented audiences with reenactments of famous battles between the American military and various Native American tribes.³¹ His shows also included rough-riding, sharpshooting, and horseback marksmanship exhibitions. Cody’s show was the epitome of nationalism as spectacle as the showman recreated

²⁸ “The Garden Tournament.”

²⁹ Theodore Roosevelt. “Sept. 29 and 30 Holidays.” *New York Times*, Sep 19, 1899.

³⁰ “Dewey on their Left Arms.” *The Omaha Daily Bee*, December 2, 1898.

³¹ Louis Warren. *Buffalo Bill’s America*, Vintage Books, New York City, 2005.

famous battles on the frontier that emphasized American military prowess. After the Spanish American War, Cody began including reenactments of the Battle of San Juan Hill, a battle that was presented to Americans as one of the decisive battles in the war.³² Cody's show also became the first public entertainment form to include the singing of "The Star-Spangled Banner" at the beginning of the show, and some argue that the Wild West Show inspired the song to become the national anthem.³³ According to Louis Warren, one of Cody's many biographers, "At no point was the flow between entertainment and expansionist politics more obvious than in 1898."³⁴

Though most of the nationalist entertainment offered by Cody's Wild West Show was simply playing to an all-around feeling of American pride, Cody also used some of the same tactics established by tattooed sideshows in representing the evils of foreign nations. For example, in July of 1898 Cody put Cubans in his show "Each one on leave for honorable wounds." According to Miller, Cody focused on the ex-soldier's wounds as a way to tell the story of brutal Spanish rule over the Cubans.³⁵ One of the most famous examples of this tactic was Sergeant Eleodoro Hernandez who was shot, tortured, and had his leg needlessly amputated after he refused to give the Spanish information. Though the details of this story were patently different than the tattooed sideshow stories of captivity and torture, the context was basically the same. In both instances, showmen were using examples of torture as public examples of a foreign nation's brutality. With the Cubans, they had actually been wounded in war, but their

³² The battle of San Juan Hill was presented to audiences as a great strategic victory for Americans, but Miller suggests that the battle was an unorganized mess, in which Americans simply took advantage of chaos, despite heavy casualties. However, the battle became a famous example of the greatness of the American Rough Riders. p.101

³³ Louis Warren. *Buffalo Bill's America*, Vintage Books, New York, 2005. p.238

³⁴ Ibid.464.

³⁵ Miller p. 26

purpose for the show was the same as the tattooed man; to highlight foreign savagery, and to exemplify that such brutality could be a danger to white audiences. By 1900, over ten million Americans in 300 cities had been to see Cody's Wild West Show.

A litany of work has been published that cover the many complexities and intricacies of the Spanish American War.³⁶ For historians such as Kristen Hoganson, Bonnie Miller, and Amy Greenberg, the Spanish American War was the result of popular media forms taking advantage of American ideas of masculinity to gather support for foreign wars. These scholars are in relative agreement that the imagery and arguments used in support of the war played to working-class ideas about male dominance; presenting white Americans as the saviors of their dark-skinned neighbors against the brutal, savage Spanish. The scholarship also suggests that after America's war with Spain, the imagery of the island cultures that America was 'saving' changed to imply the need for American control. For Bonnie Miller, this imagery marks a change "from liberation to conquest." Over the last years of the 1890s, pro/anti-imperialist imagery can be found in newspapers and magazines across the country, each presenting readers with varying arguments as to why America should, or should not take control of the formerly Spanish colonies. In the end, the pro-imperialists got what they wanted and America took control of the former Spanish colonies of Cuba, Puerto Rico, and the Philippines, while also annexing Hawaii, Guam, and Samoa.

The importance of the Spanish American War to this work lies in the symbolism and imagery that was used to garner support/resistance from the American citizenry regarding American imperialism. In many of the political cartoons that were so reflective of American's

³⁶ List further reading about SAW

sense of nationalism, the island cultures of Cuba, Puerto Rico, and the Philippines were depicted as childlike savages, in need of American protection. In images that were patently anti-imperialist, the island cultures were presented as uncivilized savages that America would never be able to *civilize*. Though some historians argue that this kind of imagery of foreign cultures begins with Barnum during his 1860 “What is it?” exhibit, the foundations of this imagery was the tattooed sideshows of the early nineteenth century.

It is completely understandable that scholars would see Barnum’s exhibit as one of the first steps in the development of imagery depicting foreign cultures as uncivilized savages. Barnum put a mentally impaired individual on stage as a living example of the lack of evolution. This act brings with it a multitude of racist implications and it clearly belongs in the history of using people of color to create a public spectacle. However, tattooed sideshow attractions were the first to popularize fantasies of uncivilized island savages, torturing any who befell the awful fate of washing up on their shores. The major difference between imagery of black people and imagery of island cultures lies in the end game for American interests. With black people, Americans were insinuating that they were stupid and helpless, thus, slavery was not that bad because they would not know what to do with an equal society. This kind of imagery was employed to validate slavery, and later, outright oppression of black people. With island cultures the imagery almost specifically insinuates the benefits of imperialism. This is evident in one of the first examples of contact with the people in the South Pacific, when James Cook mentioned how Western flora and fauna would thrive in the New Zealand environment. Clearly, conquest was seen as an inevitability from the Western perspective, and this feeling informed the development of imagery depicting island cultures. This imagery begins with the stories of Cabri, Rutherford, O’Connell and Costentenus, but the realities of conquest reach their zenith when

American media sources appropriated the fantasies created by tattooed sideshows to excite imperialist feelings among the American populace. The Spanish American War was not just a war between America and Spain. It was the final event in a one-hundred-and-twenty-year campaign to paint foreign cultures as helpless, weak people who needed what the Western world called civilization.

At the turn of the century, tattooing had come full circle in America. First it was an act of foreign savages that tortured adventurous, white sailors who happened upon the shores of far-away islands. Tattooing was something exotic from the 'Orient,' a place in the world that was not as "civilized" as America, but further along in the civilization process than the island "savages." Finally, tattooing became an act of patriotic men and women from the working class who appropriated the art form to fit American ideals. The tattooed man Frank Howard's memoir, published in 1888, makes a statement that sums up the American concept of the tattoo at the turn of the century: "thus, tattooing has progressed and widened its circle of converts, until now it is more universally practiced by enlightened whites than by its barbarous progenitors." Howard, who was married to the tattooed lady Annie Howard, clearly states here that whites had accepted and improved upon the art of tattooing, but the concepts of foreigners as barbarous savages was still clearly engrained in the minds of Americans when thinking of island cultures. Thus, the history of tattooing, and its acceptance by whites in America, is the history of a changing symbol that was once used as an example of foreign savagery, until the foreigners very existence was enough to garner racist assumptions by the American populace.