

P.T. Barnum and America's Obsession with 'The Other'

Phineas Taylor Barnum is widely considered to be the most influential entertainer of the nineteenth century. His museum and traveling circuses were attended by tens of millions of Americans, and his business practices paved the way for the development of America's commercialized entertainment culture.¹ Barnum's exploits, his life, and his effect on the society around him have been well covered by myriad historians and biographers, but his importance to this work lies in his role as one of the most prolific exhibitors of the human body in the history of popular entertainment. Barnum took small sideshow acts like giants, Siamese twins, dwarfs, people with missing limbs, and many other so-called 'freaks' and he turned them into major attractions for a working-class audience. He did so through clever advertising and showmanship by concocting elaborate backstories that made his acts more interesting and fantastic. Essentially, Barnum pulled the freak show out of small inns and taverns and brought it into the mainstream. What is often left out of Barnum's history is how his human exhibitions intersect with the dissemination of xenophobic ideas about foreign cultures that laid the foundation for American imperialism overseas. Throughout the following section, my work will trace how Barnum's entertainments helped propagate ideas of foreign island cultures as uncivilized savages who were in need of Western civilization.

In December 1841, Barnum entered the entertainment business in New York City after he bought the failing Scudders Museum and renamed it the American Museum.² For a few years

¹ Barnum is an instrumental figure in the history of advertising. He made a career advertising everything he did as the greatest, best, most extravagant thing anyone had ever seen. The type of hyperbolic advertisement that Barnum established in his museum and circus inspired countless others to employ similar practices. Further, Barnum's circus was the largest traveling circus to date during the late nineteenth century. As such, the American military sent commanders to watch how he was able to transport such a large exhibition so efficiently. His methods also paved the way for other major traveling exhibitions such as Bill Cody's Wild West Show.

² Neil Harris, *Humbug*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973), 40.

previously, Barnum had managed some sideshow performers, but it was the American Museum that would make Barnum a major name in the entertainment business. Barnum came to New York “on the eve of what can only be termed an amusement explosion,” claims Harris.³ Museums had long been a part of major cities like Philadelphia and New York City, but their purposes were typically for the enlightened refinement of their audience. When theaters began to pop up all around the New York City, they created more competition for the public’s attention, causing museums to have a harder time maintaining a profitable business.⁴ In this context, Barnum saw opportunity. After purchasing Shudders, Barnum quickly moved to fill his museum with as many ‘curiosities’ as he possibly could. The *American Museum*, thus, became a stationary location where white audiences could go see the lowbrow ‘freakshow’ that was disappearing from more high-class institutions.

Part of Barnum’s genius lies in his understanding of the growing conservative, Christian middle class who considered the theater to be a space of immorality and vice. Barnum saw an opportunity to appeal to this specific segment of society who wanted to be entertained by public performance, but did not want to attend the ‘immoral’ low-class theater, or the highfalutin upper-class theater or museum. Thus, he sought out to create a business that was moral and family friendly, but also amusing. According to Neil Harris, Barnum’s *American Museum* was a place where the showman could “mount dramatic entertainments or present variety acts under the guise of education and public enlightenment.”⁵ For Harris, Barnum exploited the educational aspect of the museum by presenting his audience with legitimate educational content, but then exploited that authority by including shows that were presented as educational but were, in fact,

³ Harris, 37.

⁴ Harris, 42.

⁵ Harris, 36

complete fabrications. Further, Harris argues that the audience was not completely ignorant to the fact that there was a certain level of trickery included in some of Barnum's shows. Harris calls this phenomenon the "operational aesthetic," which supposes that Barnum's audience exhibited a sense of playfulness with the truth and reality of the showman's 'curiosities.'⁶

Barnum learned early in his career that his American audience was susceptible to humbug, and that the ambiguity of truth could be profitable. Barnum's first exploit into the popular entertainment industry was in 1835 when he put on a show at Niblo's Garden featuring an eighty-year old slave by the name of Joice Heth. Barnum claimed that Heth was the 161-year-old former "mammy" of George Washington.⁷ Audiences were encouraged to ask her questions about her life, and she would give details that supported the farce. Barnum travelled around New England with Heth for seven months, until her death in 1836.⁸ According to a newspaper article in the *New York Herald*, upon her death, Barnum had Heth's autopsy performed in front of paying customers to prove that she was, in fact, over one hundred and sixty years old.⁹ When the coroner proclaimed that Heth was approximately eighty years old, Barnum simply claimed that the body was an imposter and the real Heth was in Connecticut.¹⁰ Barnum profited around \$10,000 for the autopsy.¹¹ This early endeavor in the entertainment business showed the young Barnum that "the public would be more excited by controversy than conclusiveness...The only requirement was to keep the issue alive and in print," state Harris.¹² It was also Barnum's first human exhibition; an act that would later come to define his career.

⁶ Harris, 57.

⁷ Harris, 26.

⁸ Adams, 2-3. Further, Adams does an excellent job of explaining how Heth's exhibition played into the contemporary discourse regarding slavery. For Adams, Barnum used Heth to push an anti-abolitionist message.

⁹ "Another Hoax," *The New York Herald*, Feb. 27, 1836.

¹⁰ Harris, 25.

¹¹ "Another Hoax"

¹² Harris, 23.

After purchasing the *American Museum*, Barnum inherited some of the previous museum's sideshow acts, including James O'Connell, "The Tattooed Man," and his story of captivity among the Pohnpeians.¹³ Working for Scudders, O'Connell had been a simple freakshow among the many other 'oddities.' However, once Barnum took over the museum he began running ads for the museum featuring, in large bold print, "MR. O'CONNELL THE TATTOOED MAN," who was going to "give an historical account of his sufferings for eleven years while a prisoner in the hands of barbarous savages."¹⁴ Whereas O'Connell had been just another sideshow, Barnum made him one of the main attractions of his museum and drew crowds in with his incredible story of captivity among the 'savages.' When O'Connell took the stage, he performed an Irish jig, showed off his tattoos, and told the audience of his time in Pohnpei, therein becoming the first exhibition in America that was intended to represent and discuss the customs and civilization of a foreign island culture.¹⁵ Soon after Barnum employed James O'Connell, the showman sought out foreign peoples to put on display at his museum. In the process, Barnum began to exploit American fantasies about the outside world.

Though Barnum employed a variety of foreign peoples as sideshow entertainers, in the early years of the American museum the showman had a clear interest in exhibiting cannibals. Cannibalism was a particularly hot topic in America in 1838 after the United States "sponsored an expedition to Fiji, to survey the islands and investigate a massacre of the crew of an American

¹³ Harris, 40.

¹⁴ "Barnum's American Museum," *New York Herald*, Nov 22, 1842.

¹⁵ In the 1830s, American academics had yet to create a field of study for the analysis of culture. Ethnology, the precursor to Anthropology, was founded in 1842 with the establishment of the American Ethnological Society. Thus, it is unlikely that there were any lectures about foreign cultures in museum lecture halls by the time O'Connell took the stage for the first time. Further, captivity narratives consistently discussed the culture of Native Americans, but that was always in print rather than performance. For further reading: Robert Lowie, *The History of Ethnological Theory*, (New York City: Farrar & Rinehart, 1975).

vessel.”¹⁶ According to Robert Bogdan, this expedition caught the interest of the American public, and after the crew reported back that they had seen the ceremonious consumption of a human eye, the public became convinced that “human flesh was a mainstay of the Islander’s diet.”¹⁷ Further, the expedition, led by Charles Wilkes, concluded that an American ship had been shipwrecked and their crew eaten by Fijian natives.¹⁸ This act was, and still is, particularly taboo in Western culture, and, for Westerners, claims of cannibalism served to demarcate the South Pacific Islanders and explicitly ‘uncivilized.’ Indeed, claims of cannibalism can be found in numerous travel journals of Western explorers throughout the eighteenth century, including one of the most famous travel journals: Captain James Cook’s, *A Journal of a voyage round the world in HMS Endeavour 1768-1771*.¹⁹ Although some cultures did engage in the act of cannibalism, the fact that the accusation came up so frequently suggests that Western explorers often exaggerated a foreign culture’s primitiveness by simply claiming that they were cannibals. Likely in the same vein, according to Bogdan, “With his keen business acumen, Barnum sensed the appeal cannibals might have” for his paying audience.²⁰

After O’Connell’s successful exhibition, Barnum attempted to exhibit an alleged Fijian cannibal named Vendovi, but was ultimately unsuccessful after the man died of tuberculosis upon arrival in New York.²¹ However, in 1845, Barnum acquired another supposed cannibal who

¹⁶ Bogdan 179

¹⁷ Bogdan 179

¹⁸ Ibid

¹⁹ James Cook was an English explorer who ‘discovered’ many of the islands in the South Pacific. His discovery led to the colonization of many of the South Pacific islands, and his journals were well respected in the academic community. Cook died in Hawaii while attempting to arrest an island chief.

²⁰ Bogdan 179

²¹ Bogdan p.179 Vendovi was a native of Fiji who had been ‘arrested’ by Charles Wilkes during the United States Exploring Expedition 1838-1842 for the murder of two American sailors, including Wilkes’ nephew Henry, a few years prior. Vendovi died upon arrival to New York, likely due to tuberculosis. For further reading: William Stanton, *The Great United States Exploring Expedition of 1838-1842* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975).

he exhibited as the “New Zealand Canibal [sic] chief” alongside a “Bedouin tribe.”²² Barnum also exhibited “Two cannibals of the island in the South Pacific’ in the mid-1840s.²³ Though Barnum did exhibit people from other areas of the world, it is clear that he intended Pacific Islanders to serve as a specific type of character in his exhibitions; the primitive cannibal. Following the successful exhibition of supposed cannibals, Barnum began to show a “growing interest in racial displays,” claims cultural historian Bluford Adams.²⁴ This interest would come to define his particular brand of entertainment over the course of his career.

Although it was not likely the showman’s intent, Barnum’s exploitation of the foreign ‘Other’ as a ‘freak’ helped to create a framework for xenophobic ideas about foreign island cultures. Barnum was an entertainer who was merely trying to fulfill his audiences’ interests. However, in promoting shows that represented island peoples as uncivilized, man-eating, barbarians, he was teaching his audience how to think about the people in island nations. Essentially, Barnum used his racial displays to establish a quantifiable difference between his uncivilized exhibitions and his civilized white audience, a juxtaposition served to dehumanize foreign peoples in a spectacle for mass consumption.

Civilization and Manifest Destiny

Whether it was his intention or not, Barnum’s exhibition of “uncivilized” cultures in the mid-nineteenth century was consistent with the Euro-American concept of manifest destiny. By 1845, the idea that Anglo-Saxon Americans were destined by God to bring American ‘civilization’ to ‘savage’ cultures began to proliferate in American media sources. This idea is

²² Adams, 166.

²³ Bogdan, 31.

²⁴ Adams 166

best exemplified by the phrase “Manifest Destiny,” coined by John O’Sullivan in 1845. In an article entitled “Annexation,” published in *The United States Magazine and Democratic Review*, O’Sullivan expounded his theory for the future of America that included the consolidation of ‘American’ lands from the Atlantic to the Pacific.²⁵

The key concept of Manifest Destiny was the idea that the ‘civilized’ Euro-Americans were ordained by God to ‘civilize’ the rest of the country by force. White Americans, “armed with the plough and the rifle” would spread across the land, “marking its trail with schools and colleges, courts and representative halls, mills and meeting-houses.”²⁶ O’Sullivan’s concept of ‘Manifest Destiny’ was originally meant to relate to the seizure and ‘civilization’ of Native American peoples, however, the idea of ‘civilizing’ non-white cultures was quickly employed by the press to argue for American expansion into foreign lands that laid outside of the North American continent. Manifest Destiny was predicated on the idea that it was America’s job to civilize underdeveloped land, so it only makes sense that the press soon began to look at other so-called uncivilized lands and people that needed to be brought into civilization. For example, in a *New York Daily Times* article from 1852, entitled “The Science of Manifest Destiny,” the author suggests that America needed to expand into Cuba and Hawaii in order to spread American Republicanism.²⁷ The article expresses a clear, and explicit claim that white-Western men were superior to everyone else as the author states, “Everywhere beyond our own borders, on this Western hemisphere, do we see the need of the steady, ballasting traits of Anglo-Saxonism.”²⁸ The author then states, “It will never do to argue the practicability of our system

²⁵ John O’Sullivan, “Annexation,” *The United States Magazine and Democratic Review*, Volume 17 (New York: 1845), 5-6, 9-10.

²⁶ O’Sullivan

²⁷ “The Science of Manifest Destiny.” *New York Daily Times (1851-1857)*; Sep 9, 1852;

²⁸ Ibid

beyond the confines of the race until the experiment is abundantly tried,” which suggests that the author believes that white, Westerners needed to test whether or not it was practical to attempt instilling Western style governments in non-white nations.²⁹ Another article, published in the *New York Daily Times*, also exploits the idea of Manifest Destiny to argue for American imperialism as the author states, “Manifest destiny and the horizon move together. The national progress is best described as expansion.”³⁰ The author goes on to argue for the annexation of Hawaii and other South Pacific islands, suggesting that Americans would not meet much resistance because Christian missionaries had made the Island peoples a “conquered culture.”³¹ Basically, the authors here were suggesting that white Americans should see all ‘uncivilized’ lands through the lens of Manifest Destiny and begin conquest of any foreign lands that did not exhibit the traits of Western culture.

The importance of manifest destiny to my analysis lies directly in the concept’s main tenet: that it was the white man’s job to civilize the supposedly uncivilized. According to Amy Greenberg, the idea of manifest destiny was directly tied to contemporary American’s sense of manhood and, in turn, their thirst for domination over other cultures. Greenberg argues that the concept of manifest destiny was used as an excuse for a variety of America’s conflicts throughout the nineteenth century, such as the constant conquest of Native American lands, and the Mexican American War, however, she neglects to assess the connection between the foundational ideas of manifest destiny and the representation of foreign peoples urban popular entertainment. At the heart of both manifest destiny and P.T. Barnum’s human exhibitions is the concept that the ‘other’ is uncivilized, thus, both manifest destiny and Barnum’s exhibitions were

²⁹ “The Science of Manifest Destiny”

³⁰ “Annexation in the Pacific.” *New York Daily Times*; Nov 11, 1851. p.2

³¹ Ibid

simply symptoms of a larger discourse regarding the idea of civilization and how that plays into the relationship between cultures.

In the early years of his career, P.T. Barnum was continuously putting people from the South Pacific on stage as living examples of uncivilized cultures. His shows specifically emphasized characteristics, such as cannibalism or tattooing, that projected an implicit message that the performers on stage, and the cultures they come from, were uncivilized. In a society that was growing more and more confident that it was their duty to dominate the uncivilized people of the world, Barnum's public exhibitions played upon his audience's sensibilities and turned cultural domination into an extravagant spectacle. For the rest of his career, Barnum's entertainments offered a wide variety of content, but the concept of a civilized white, Anglo-Saxon culture against the barbarism of non-white Others was never far from the main stage.

Barnum Takes His Show on the Road

Throughout the 1850s and early-1860s, Barnum continued to exhibit all things exotic in his American Museum. However, on July 13, 1865, P.T. Barnum's museum burned to the ground after more than two decades of success in the New York entertainment business. According to the *New York Times*, approximately one hundred people were injured, and the fire caused around one million dollars in damage.³² Luckily, the fire happened outside of business hours, so there were no deaths, but the American Museum was completely destroyed leaving Barnum with nothing to salvage from his eccentric collection of 'curiosities.' Barnum quickly

³² "Disastrous Fire," *New York Times*, July 14, 1865.

invested in procuring a new collection of exotic curiosities, and opened the New American Museum in November of 1865. However, three years later, that museum also burned down.³³

Following the destruction of the New American Museum, Barnum spent a few years trying to get into politics, and was elected mayor of Bridgeport, Connecticut, but he eventually decided to return to the public entertainment business and dedicate his time to the circus industry. Barnum, along with his business partner C. W. Coup, set out to create one of the most extravagant traveling circuses in the country, entitled the *Greatest Show on Earth*. The circus was a massive endeavor that included many of the attractions that had made his museum so popular: namely, a hippodrome (theater), a menagerie (collection of animals), and a museum of ‘curiosities’. According to Harris, Barnum and Coup revolutionized the way circuses travelled from city to city, likening the traveling circus to military mobilization.³⁴ Unlike the American Museum, which was a stationary building in New York City, Barnum’s circus brought his racial displays into small towns across the country. Americans no longer needed to visit a large city to enjoy the exploitation of the outside world, the world came to them.

³³ “Barnum and the Insurance Companies,” *New York Herald*, December 12, 1868.

³⁴ Harris, 242. Janet Davis agrees with this assessment and claims that the military actually sent people to watch the circus move from city to city to gather ideas for more efficient military mobilization.



35

Much like the American Museum, the exotic and foreign continued to be a major facet of Barnum's circus. In 1872, at the beginning of his career in the circus business, Barnum once again sought to exploit his audiences' fear of cannibalism. According to an advertisement for an exhibit titled "The Fiji Cannibals," Barnum had brought four cannibals to the United States to exhibit in his traveling circus. The backstory for the four "Fijians" was that there had been a

³⁵ *Fiji Cannibals*, E. & H.T. Anthony. Print. New York, c. 1872.

rebellion in Fiji, in which two Christian missionaries were taken to be eaten by their captors. However, the Fijian king had converted to Christianity, so he sent out warriors to rescue the missionaries. Barnum claimed that the four Fijian circus performers were war prisoners from that rebellion. According to Barnum's sixteen-page advertisement for the Fiji Cannibals, the captives were originally destined "to have their tongues cut out, their brains eaten and their skulls converted into drinking cups, while the bones of their bodies were to be made into ornaments to be worn by the vanquishers."³⁶ However, the missionaries supposedly saved the four by suggesting that they be sent to the United States to be introduced to the "modes and customs of civilization." After their arrival in America, Barnum had the famous Mathew Brady take photographs of the "cannibals" and produced cabinet cards (mounted photographs) as advertisements for their exhibition in upcoming shows. Unfortunately, one of the Fijians died right before they were to be exhibited, and Barnum used his death to promote the exhibition further, suggesting that he had gotten sick and the others ate him. Though all of this might have been entertaining, none of it was true. The "Fiji Princess" was actually from Virginia, and the men, though born in Fiji, had been raised in California by missionaries. None of the four were cannibals.³⁷ In true Barnum fashion, the "Fiji Cannibals" served as an entertaining exploitation of white-American's fears of the outside world. They were not cannibals, but their dark skin alone made them believable as uncivilized cannibals to a white audience.

³⁶ *History of P.T. Barnum's Fiji Cannibals (1872)*, found in Bogdan, 180.

³⁷ Bogdan, 180.



Syracuse Univ. Library, Special Collections

38

Following the exhibition of the “Fiji Cannibals,” in 1882, Barnum procured “The Wild Men of Boreno” for his traveling circus. “The Wild Men of Boreno” were a relatively popular traveling freakshow in the United States during the 1860s and early-1870s, however, they became widely known after they ended up working for P.T. Barnum. The show included two dwarfs with severe mental disabilities, called Waino and Plutano, who went on stage, often in chains, and thrashed around and acted like animals.³⁹ Further, the two would often perform while, “talking strange gibberish and scurrying about the platform snapping and snarling,” states Bogdan.⁴⁰ Along with their theatrical performance, a pamphlet was distributed, entitled “What We Know About Waino and Plutano, The Wild Men of Borneo,” which told an exaggerated story of how the two men were captured.⁴¹ According to Bogdan, the pamphlet also included a

³⁸ Charles Eisenmann, *Waino and Plutano*. c. 1870. Ronald G. Becker collection of Charles Eisenmann photographs, Special Collections Research Center, Syracuse University Libraries. Syracuse, NY.

³⁹ Bogdan, 123.

⁴⁰ Bogdan, 123.

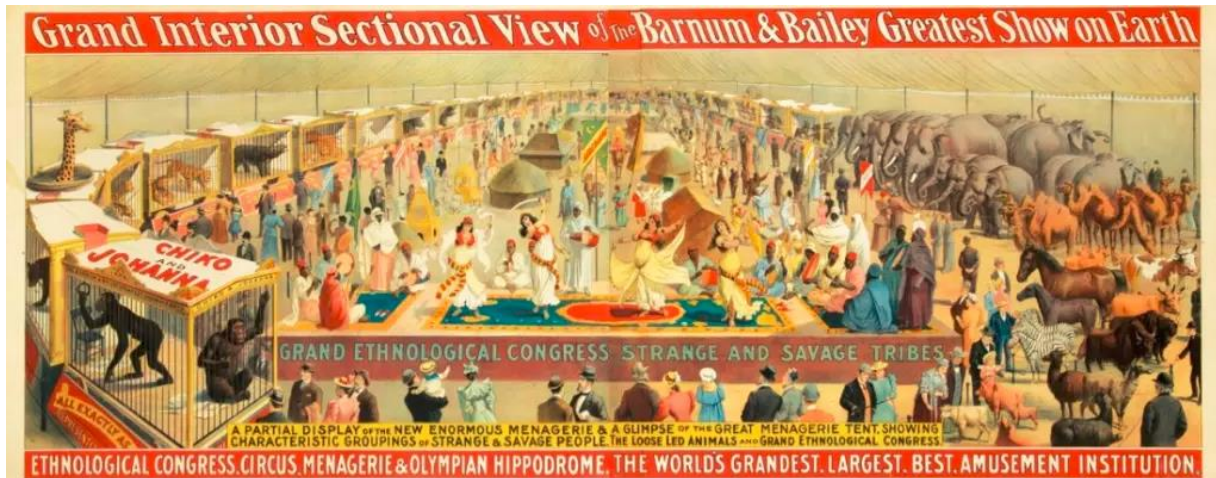
⁴¹ *What We Know About Waino and Plutano, The Wild Men of Borneo*, (New York City: Damon and Preetts Printers, c. 1878).

description of Borneo that accurately described the country's flora and fauna, but "outlandishly embellished tales of the indigenous people."⁴² The pamphlet claimed that the island was inhabited by such an isolated race of people that they were basically half animal, half man, and wholly lost to civilization.⁴³ The two men, born Hiram and Barney Davis, were actually born in the United States, and grew up on a farm in Ohio before their mother sold them to a showman named Layman Warner to be exhibited in traveling freakshows.

Like the 'cannibals,' the 'wild men' were put on stage as representatives of some far-away island culture. Both shows presented audiences with dangerous, uncivilized, and in the case of the 'wild men,' sub-human performers who implicitly played upon the audiences' assumptions about native peoples in foreign lands. However, the 'cannibals' were not cannibals, any more than the 'wild men' were wild. These were spectacles, curated by showmen, performed by performers, to entertain a white-audience that was accustomed to believing that people from the outside world were uncivilized sub-humans. By using these shows to spread inaccurate and derogatory ideas about foreign peoples, showmen like Barnum were normalizing the dehumanization of actual, real-life island peoples.

⁴² Bogdan 123

⁴³ Bogdan 124



Throughout most of his career, Barnum's racial displays were produced in the traditional style of the freakshow. He put people on stage from Fiji and New Zealand, but sold tickets to their exhibition because they were 'cannibals.' From Africa, he put on a show exhibiting an unevolved human.⁴⁴ From South America, mentally handicapped people who were supposedly Aztecs.⁴⁵ From Borneo, supposedly sub-human. In essence, Barnum's shows created a strong link between the grotesque and the foreign. However, in 1883, Barnum created a show that removed most of the traditional freakshow characteristics and displayed foreign peoples simply because they were foreign and 'uncivilized.' The performance was called the "Ethnological Congress" and it included "representatives of noble and peculiar tribes...types which otherwise the viewer "would never see, as they can only be sought in their native countries."⁴⁶ The Ethnological Congress, was basically a parade with hundreds of people from around the world dressed up in exotic clothing that was meant to be representative of the traditional, non-Western

⁴⁴ This is in reference to Barnum's 'What is it?' exhibit, in which he put a mentally handicapped black man named William Johnson in a furry suit and claimed that he was the missing link in evolution. This show is one of Barnum's most infamous racial displays.

⁴⁵ This show was called the "Living Aztec Children" and Barnum dressed up two mentally handicapped people from South America and claimed that they were the last descendants of the Aztec peoples.

⁴⁶ Phineas Taylor Barnum, *Struggles and Triumphs: Forty Years' Recollection of P.T. Barnum*, (Buffalo: Warren, Johnson & co., 1872), 349.

garb of their respective countries. Barnum states that he wanted to form “a collection, in pairs or otherwise, of all the uncivilized races in existence.”⁴⁷ Unlike the former freakshow, this performance exploited the Western gaze and provided Barnum’s white audience to look upon the ‘Other’ from the comfort of their own American city. In creating this racialized spectacle, Barnum was in control of how these people looked on stage, how they were dressed, and how they were presented to the audience thereby placing the agency of representation in the hands of a white, Western businessman that was attempting to exploit Otherness for profit. Within this show, Barnum was responsible for creating the fantasy of what the outside world looked like, and he used his “collection” to create identifiable caricatures of the many cultures he aimed to represent.

Along with the collection of human representatives of race, Barnum was also seeking more traditional non-white entertainers that could perform in his show as sideshow entertainers and freakshows. Barnum states, “My aim is to exhibit to the American public not only human beings from different races, but also, when practicable, those who express extraordinary peculiarities, such as giants, dwarfs, singular disfigurements of the person, dexterity in the use of weapons, dancing, singing, juggling, unusual feats of strength or agility. &c.”⁴⁸ By mixing the freakshow acts with his racial displays, Barnum curated an orientalist fantasy of the Other that played upon his audience’s sense of racial and cultural superiority over the ‘uncivilized’ peoples of the world.

Barnum’s “Ethnological Congress,” though implicitly racist, must be understood as a product of contemporary pseudoscientific thinking. According to Adams, in the late-nineteenth

⁴⁷ Barnum quote found in Adams, 181

⁴⁸ Ibid

century, academics in the new field of Ethnology were searching for proof that Anglo-Saxon peoples had literally evolved from darker skinned races that still inhabited Africa and Asia.⁴⁹ They had tried measuring facial features, brain, hair, intelligence and other factors to try and prove their theories but none of those studies found any conclusive evidence of white superiority.⁵⁰ Ethnology was basically a racist ‘science’ that grew out of Charles Darwin’s theory of evolution. Darwin’s *On the Origins of Species*, published in 1859, argued that all species shared common ancestors, and the differences among species were the result of millions of years of species adapting to their environments. Though Darwin did not apply his theory to human beings, Ethnologists attempted to apply the theory of evolution to humans under the assumption that different races of man represented different stages of the evolutionary process. Unsurprisingly, Ethnologists found no conclusive evidence to support the idea that some races of man were less evolved, however, Adams states, “where ethnology failed, the Ethnological Congress succeeded...the bodily Otherness of the Congress’s freaks was beyond dispute.”⁵¹ Adams’ statement here is tongue-in-cheek, as the historian’s point is that Barnum succeeded where ethnological “scientists” had failed. Barnum’s audience only needed to look upon the ‘uncivilized’ specimens and be reassured of their racial superiority.

Barnum’s racial displays employed the contemporary field of Ethnology, but it is likely that the showman did not agree with its main premise: that some races were sub-human. In his autobiography, *Struggles and Triumphs*, Barnum clearly argues against the idea that non-white races were scientifically inferior to Anglo-Saxons. Barnum states, “You may take a dozen specimens of both sexes from the lowest type of man found in Africa; their race has been buried

⁴⁹ Adams 183

⁵⁰ *ibid*

⁵¹ *Ibid*

for ages in ignorance and barbarism, and you can scarcely perceive that they have any more of manhood or womanhood than so many orang-outangs or gorillas. You look at their low foreheads, their thick skulls and lips, their woolly heads, their flat noses, their dull, lazy eyes, and you may be tempted to adopt the language of this minority committee [of ethnologists] and exclaim: Surely these people have ‘no inventive faculties, no genius for the arts, or for any of those occupations requiring intellect and wisdom.’ But bring them out into the light of civilization...and the human soul will begin to develop itself.”⁵² Despite the fact that Barnum may have disagreed with ethnologists regarding the scientific basis of their racial assumptions, it is also clear that he believed that bringing Western civilization to foreign peoples was the only way for them to become civilized. Thus, the Ethnological Congress was created by a man who did not necessarily believe that foreign people were scientifically inferior, but did believe that they were culturally inferior because of their lack of influence from Western civilization. By creating a spectacle out of race in his Ethnological Congress, Barnum was attempting to exemplify the many ways foreign people differed from his white audience in an attempt to suggest that, though they are uncivilized and savage now, they could become civilized if given the chance. This, mixed with the contemporary concept of manifest destiny, made Barnum’s Ethnological Congress a spectacle of Western imperialism. For, according to the main tenet of manifest destiny, if the subjects on stage were uncivilized, then it was only a matter of time before Western powers brought civilization to their shores through conquest.

⁵² Barnum, *Struggles*, 627.

The World's Columbian Exhibition

P.T. Barnum died in 1891, but that did not stop the showman's influence on American popular culture. In 1893, the World's Columbian Exhibition was held in Chicago, and, according to Bluford Adams, "P.T. Barnum was very much a presence."⁵³ With the circus, Barnum traveled the country, exhibiting his Ethnological Congress in a space that was understood to be entertaining and extravagant. However, when the Columbian World's Exposition appropriated Barnum's main attraction and included its own ethnological exhibits, Barnum's imperialist spectacle officially infiltrated a respectable, authoritative space for learning. Even in the Exposition, the ethnological shows were still fantasy, but the World's Columbian Exhibition did not operate under the same "operational aesthetic" that characterized Barnum's entertainments. With a Barnum museum or circus, the crowd was aware that there was some level of trickery or spectacle, which was an accepted feature of the entertainment. However, employing Barnumesque racial displays in a respectable World Exhibition took the practice out of the context of the spectacle and placed it in an educational context. Essentially, the World's Columbian Exhibition made Barnum's exploitation of 'uncivilized' races a part of an authoritative institution that was not widely understood to be creating fantasy. Barnum's spectacle had become mainstream.

World's Expositions have an extensive history in Western culture, dating back to 1851 with the first World's Exposition in London, England. World's Fairs/Exhibitions typically consisted of a large space (much larger than a fair ground) filled with buildings that represented the many technological, cultural, and industrial advancements from around the world.⁵⁴ Many

⁵³ Adams 193

⁵⁴ Robert Rydell, *All the Worlds a Fair: Visions of Empire at American International Exhibitions 1876-1916*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984).

nations also got their own buildings that symbolized the various aspects of the respective country. For example, at the Columbian World's Exposition one could visit the Agricultural Building to learn about new agricultural techniques, then stop by the French Building to learn about the country of France, and then visit Machinery Hall to learn about new machine technology. The size, design, and the contents of the buildings were all carefully curated to teach visitors about the topic, or country they were 'visiting.' On the surface, these events were a celebration of industrialization, art, technology, culture, and globalization that was taking place around the world. According to World's Fairs historian Robert Rydell, "These events were triumphs of hegemony as well as symbolic edifices."⁵⁵ Rydell argues that the World's Fair was a place where the powerful could celebrate their domination of the working classes and weaker nations of the world.⁵⁶ Within the architecture of the buildings, the artifacts that were chosen to be displayed, and the arrangement of the buildings in relation to one another existed symbolic messages that celebrated the power that the elite held "because of its position and function in the world of production."⁵⁷ As such, these events were effectively celebrations of Western civilization and, in turn, Western imperialism. Attended by over twenty seven million patrons, Chicago's World's Colombian Exposition of 1893 is considered to be one of the "culminating U.S. cultural events of the nineteenth century."⁵⁸

To find Barnum's influence on the World's Colombian Exposition in Chicago, one need look no further than the ethnological villages on the Midway Plaisance. Chicago's exposition was laid out in two distinct sections; the White City and the Midway Plaisance. The White City was the supposed main space for the event and included structures that represented the various

⁵⁵ Rydell 2

⁵⁶ Rydell 2

⁵⁷ Rydell 2

⁵⁸ Adams 193

nations of the world, and building that housed lecture halls for learning about various subjects. In essence, the White City was what the exhibition was all about; teaching the audience about advancements in Western society. Conversely, the Midway Plaisance was the commercialized section of the event where one could go ride the Ferris wheel, or look upon the sideshow spectacle of the ethnological villages. Midway attendees could visit a variety of small villages that represented the people and culture from various civilized or barbarous areas of the world: including Ireland, Algeria, Dahomey, Germany, Samoa, Java, and Egypt.⁵⁹ Within each of these villages, one could gaze upon people and objects that were ‘representative’ of their country’s culture. For example, one of the most popular villages was the Egyptian village which included snake charmers, camels, and scantily clad women doing exotic dances.

What makes the Midway Plaisance so important is the juxtaposition it created between the ‘civilized’ and ‘barbarous’ nations of the world. According to Bederman this juxtaposition was designed to guide visitors to a full appreciation of "the contrast between the civilized White City and the uncivilized native villages."⁶⁰ Unlike the White City with its sprawling attractions and non-linear layout, the Midway was built as on long street where an attendee would walk from civilization into the primitive world. At the beginning of the street, a patron would walk by villages that represented the white countries of Germany and Ireland, then they would proceed past the barbarous but not quite savage Egyptians and Algerians, and finish by walking past the “savage” Samoans, Dahomeyans, and Javans.⁶¹ A writer for the *Chicago Tribune* discussed the Midway Plaisance, claiming that it offered “an opportunity...to the scientific mind to descend

⁵⁹ “Nations at the Fair,” *New York Times*, April 30, 1893.

⁶⁰ Bederman, 35.

⁶¹ Bederman, 35.

the spiral of evolution...tracing humanity in its highest phases down almost to its animalistic origins.”⁶²

Adams argues that in the racially charged spectacle of civilization versus savagery, “the fierce Dahomeyans, the sensual Egyptians, and the athletic Moors all had forebearers in his [Barnum’s] shows.”⁶³ The World’s Columbian Exhibition may have been a celebration of Western advancement and culture, but the commercialized spectacle of civilization that defined the Midway was strikingly similar to the way Barnum had been exhibiting ‘uncivilized,’ foreign peoples for decades previous. This connection was not lost on contemporary Americans as the *New York Times* claimed that the ethnological village at the Midway was the “Greatest Show on Earth;” a direct reference to the late Barnum’s traveling circus.

In the end, P.T. Barnum made a career exploiting his audience’s interest in any and everything ‘exotic.’ Whether it was artifacts, animals, or people, Barnum brought his audience things that they would likely have never seen in their small town, nor in a large American city. However, in doing so, the showman also dehumanized entire populations. To his white audience, the foreign people that Barnum decided to turn into spectacles, became representative of the outside world. As such, his audience was learning how to think about the ‘primitive,’ ‘uncivilized,’ ‘savages’ that lived far beyond American shores. Every time Barnum put a supposed cannibal on stage, he was simply offering another example of how dangerous and evil the non-white world was. Though it was likely not his intention, this type of dehumanization and spectacle played upon very real feelings among his audience that it was their duty to bring civilization and order to the many uncivilized nations of the world. This makes Barnum’s career

⁶² Bederman, 35.

⁶³ Adams, 194.

relevant not only to the history of popular American culture, but to the history of American imperialism. There were many authors, journalists, politicians, and academics discussing the civilization and savagery among non-white nations during the years of Barnum's immensely successful career, but with a Barnum circus one could gaze upon the explicit need for civilization for the price of admission.