CULTURE & SOCIETY UNDER THE AMERICAN BIG TOP

JANET M. DAVIS

THE UNIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA PRESS
CHAPEL HILL & LONDON

THE CIRCUS AGE
For Andy Wildwood, the circus offered a salvation of sorts. Andy, a fictional, turn-of-the-century orphan boy in a popular novel, was unable to conform to the social mores of small-town American life. In school, he was suspended after he performed a double somersault behind the teacher's back, landed on a desk, and crashed to the floor. He accidentally set a farmer's field on fire after his friend dropped a flaming oil ring through which Andy and his horse had just jumped. Furthermore, his cruel aunt kept him hostage in her house. When a circus passed through town, Farmer Dale (who had hired Andy) told him to escape by joining the show: "I tell you I believe circus is born in you, and you can't help it. You don't have much of a life at home. You're not built for hum-drum village life. Get out, grow into something you fancy. No need being a scamp because you're a rover."  

Once Andy joined the show, he worked hard to build his body and mind. He quickly rose through the ranks and became a star acrobat, capturing loose animals and thwarting criminals who robbed the show. In a Dickensian twist at the novel's conclusion, Andy discovers that his deceased father has named him sole heir to the proceeds from a patent worth a fortune. The story of Andy Wildwood contained themes that were common to the ubiquitous genre of circus-boy fiction at the turn of the century: a poor, mistreated, and misunderstood orphan boy realizes his true potential in the exciting, nonjudgmental world of the circus. He rises from a common laborer to a star acrobat or manager, saves the show from violent weather, and easily captures loose animals and con artists.  

Proprietors and press agents also marketed the circus and Wild West to young boys as a site of educational adventure. Press releases constantly reported how small boys sneaked into the show, or how they received free tickets in exchange for hard work: "Small Boy Schemes: Seaks Circus Freaks"; "Heaven for Small Boys: In Madison Square Garden Gallery, They Find Perfect Joy"; "Elize of Youth Provided by Circus Coming: Everybody Going to See the Big Show While Youth of City Rush to Water Elephants for Free Entry."  

Edwin Norwood's *The Circus Menagerie: True Stories of Interesting Animals Told to a Boy* chronicled a boy's travels with the Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey circus.  

Although Andy Wildwood learned normative manly values at the circus—thrift, honesty, discipline, and physical fortitude—he joined the show community because he was a social outsider. At actual (rather than fictional) circuses, male gender norms were exemplified by workers who were often on the edge—nomadic members of American society who drifted, indeed "ran away" to the circus from sedentary community affiliations. In his hometown, Sherwood Anderson recalled that the male members of the local Thompson family took off every summer with the circus. "The Thompsons were a tough lot.... When they were at home the Thompsons, father and sons, hung around the saloons and bragged..."  

Male circus workers as a whole were often more liminal than female employees. Women were commonly born into the business as members of established family troupes, while transient men filled the laboring ranks at the canvas city. Nonetheless, as the last two chapters have shown, the world of the circus was far more hierarchical than Andy Wildwood's fictionalized experiences of limitless mobility would suggest.  

Proprietors promoted their exhibitions as sites of athletic Euro-American manliness. Animals and men worked harmoniously together and nonwhite men worked as "missing links," athletic ascetics, or royal "savages." But as this chapter contends, the world of the circus was one of male gender flux, with androgynous acrobats, gender-bending clowns, players in drag, and animals dressed as men. Spontaneous brawls among spectators and work-
ingmen extended these variegated masculine performances to the ground outside the ring. As a whole, the human menagerie was a place for detractive male gender play, even though the circus's deeply entrenched class-system circumscribed occupational and economic advancement within a nomadic community.

**MALE GENDER AND MODERNITY**

Fin-de-siècle circus performances of male gender reflected the ever-constant change. Gail Bederman argues that the rise of an industrial corporate economy driven by wage labor, coupled with cyclical depressions, threatened the position of the “self-made,” independent entrepreneur. Women's activism for the suffrage and their growing rejection of the ideology of separate spheres challenged the gender differentiation on which so-called “civilized” Victorian manliness was based.6 Thus, Bederman's work adds a gendered dimension to Richard Hofstadter's characterization of “anxiety” which speaks to a causal relationship between late-nineteenth-century socioeconomic upheaval and middle-class participation in repressive movements.7

These men also sought to reclaim their authority by fortifying the bond they participated in alternative models of male power such as baseball and wrestling, or embraced “primitive” cultural practices, specifically living in the wilderness or hunting wild game.8 Advocates of outdoor activity, exercise, organized sports, hunting, and adventure (collectively called the “strenuous life”) asserted that modern industrial life had made the men of the middle and upper classes “soft.” George M. Beard's *American Nervousness* (1881) and other popular classics warned that professional white-collar “brain workers” were fast becoming effeminate and impotent because they did not engage in physical labor. Social critics extended their general critique of industrial modernization to working-class men, too. Reading his own experiences working at a bicycle factory in the 1890s, Sherwood Anderson bemoaned how the assembly line separated the worker from the fruits of his labor: “When you take from man the cunning of the hunt, the opportunity to constantly create new forms in materials, you make him impotent. His maleness slips imperceptibly from him and he can no longer be himself in love, either to work or to women. ‘Standardization! Standardization! Standardization!' was to be the cry of my age and all standardization is necessarily a standardization in impotence.”9

The school represented one site of manly salvation. New, rapidly-enlarging secondary and intercollegiate athletic programs focused on the importance of “sportsmanship” in cultivating athletes of manly character. George F. Hall argued that gymnastics should be part of American boys’ educational curriculum, to counteract the “degenerative” influence of the city. It is because the brain is developed, while the muscles are allowed to wither and atrophy, that the deplored chasm between knowing and doing is often fatal to the practical effectiveness of mental and moral culture. The great increase of city and sedentary life has been so sudden that the body—which was developed by hunting, war, agriculture, and manual industries now given over to steam and machinery—to adapt itself happily or naturally to its new environment.”10 In a series of essays, articles, and speeches written in 1900, collectively published as *The Strenuous Life*, Theodore Roosevelt claimed that boys needed to balance their school work with physical exercise to become productive citizens. “I believe that those boys who take part in rough, hard play outside of school will not find any use for horse-play in school. While they study they should study just as last as they play foot-ball in a match game. It is wise to obey the homely advice: Work while you work; play while you play.”11

In some respects, this link between athletic activity and manly character was newly new. In eighteenth-century Europe, neoclassical intellectuals wedded the well-formed male body to superlative manliness.12 During the post-Civil War era, evangelical adherents of “muscular Christianity” bonded physical fitness to moral virtue. Yet at the turn of the century, physical fitness advocates now tied male athleticism to critiques of intoxication and to scientific racism. The self-styled fitness expert Ber-ner Macfadden declared that male potency was the product of vigorous exercise, fresh air, a bland diet, and frequent marital sexual intercourse. A signed Macfadden asserted that native-born Euro-American men needed to build their bodies in order to produce large families and “save” themselves from “race suicide.”13 In his aptly titled *The Virile Powers of Superb Males*, Macfadden warned: “Loose your sexual power, lose the power to reproduce your species, and, according to the laws of nature, your days of usefulness are past, and decay and death will soon overtake you.”14 In the guise of the New Woman, extraordinary immigration rates from eastern and southern Europe, and the stirrings of the Great Migration of African Americans from the rural South to urban centers, this notion of “race suicide” encapsulated contemporary native-born male anxieties.

Fighting clubs, summer camps, the Sierra Club, and other “back-to-nature” movements focused on male bodily fortification. Members of the Appa-
lachian Mountain Club (formed in 1876) marked and maintained over 200 hiking trails, and constructed stone huts and log shelters in the White Mountains. They purchased land to be held in trust for public use throughout New England. One writer waxed, "For all it has meant an opportunity to come in closer contact with the primitive."

In the late nineteenth century, the dime novel publishing house of Beadle and Adams sold thousands of copies of biographies of rugged Euroamericans like Daniel Boone, Davy Crockett, and Kit Carson. Alexander Saxton observes that such men were popular subjects because they had been mythologized into "natural aristocrats" who achieved "mastery" over the wilderness by hunting animals and fighting Native Americans.

Youthful counterparts to the back-to-nature movement like the Boy Scouts of America, the Sons of Daniel Boone, or the Woodcraft Indians, enabled white boys to assume a temporary Native identity as they dressed up as Native Americans and learned indigenous crafts and camping and survival skills. These organizations paradoxically helped heighten boys' own sense of manly whiteness through the act of what Philip Deloria succinctly calls "playing Indian."

The preservationist John Muir wrote widely about the wilderness as site of bodily fortification and epiphany. From the late 1860s onward he often lived an ascetic life, quietly staging his own remarkable death-defying bodily feats: he walked across much of the United States, fasted constantly, and climbed the snow-covered Sierras clad in a woolen shirt, denim pants, and thin shoes. He was jubilant about the natural world and wrote of the surrounding Cuba's shores as "one great song sounding forever all around the white-blooming shores of the world." Muir argued that the preservation of wild spaces was critical to human health. In addition to writing popular books, he lobbied Congress to create national parks such as Yosemite (1890) and pushed to establish the U.S. Forest Service (1891). He helped found the Sierra Club in 1892 and from 1908 to 1913 unsuccessfully fought a dam project in California's Hetch Hetchy Valley. In his writing and public activism, Muir personified widespread public ambivalence about modernization and urban encroachment.

At the same time, hunters helped lead the conservation movement for eastern men, including Ernest Thompson Seton, a founder of the Boy Scouts in the United States, poised that wild spaces should be set aside for the preservation of bear and bison. Theodore Roosevelt in 1887 became the first president of the Boone & Crockett Club, which advocated the hunt and preservation of wild animals and their natural habitat. The club's Committee on Parks helped create the National Zoo in Washington. Although Roosevelt still loved the pleasures of blood sports, he claimed that his primary interest in killing animals was to advance scientific knowledge. His efforts prompted federal legislation to save Yellowstone Park from ecological destruction, to protect sequoia groves in California, and to establish an Alaskan island to preserve for the propagation of native species.

As president of the United States, Roosevelt added 150 million acres of forest to the national forest system, and established five new national parks and sixteen national monuments.

At the turn of the century, the "primitive" pleasures of hunting large game were an essential part of masculine renewal. When Roosevelt entered the New York State legislature in 1882, fellow legislators and newspapers mocked his privileged background, fancy clothes, and high voice; they called him "weakling," "Jane-Dandy," "Punkin-Lily," and "the exquisite Mr. Roosevelt." But as the historians Edmund Morris and Gail Bederman point out, Roosevelt exploited his experiences of hunting bison and ranching in the Dakotas to transform his public persona into that of a rugged outdoorsman. Fleeing to Dakota Territory in 1884, grief-stricken after his wife and mother had died on the same day, Roosevelt chronicled his transformation from puny asthmatic to vigorous hunter when he shot a huge bison bull.

There below me, not fifty yards off, was a great bison bull. He was walking along, grazing as he walked. His glossy fall coat was in fine trim and shine in the rays of the sun, while his pride of bearing showed him to be a lusty vigor of his prime. As I rose above the crest of the hill, he held his head and cocked his tail to the air. Before he could go off, I put the ballot behind his shoulder. The wound was an almost immediately fatal one. Overjoyed with his prize, Roosevelt danced around the large carcass, shrieking "like an Indian war-chief." Roosevelt, who later became the twenty-sixth president of the American Bison Society, construed the hunt as a "primitive" pleasure which revived virile potency in "enlightened" modern men like himself.

Contemporary popular culture also articulated the notion that the wilderness was a metaphor for male renewal in modern society. Jack London's The Call of the Wild (1903) conflated animals, the wilderness, and masculine regeneration. Buck, the canine protagonist, was kidnapped from a leisurely, gentlemanly life on a ranch in Santa Clara Valley to the harsh Klondike wilderness, where men needed sled dogs during the gold rush of the 1890s. His muscles became hardened from constant travel over the icy tundra, and his disposition was made tough by fighting for scraps of food with other dogs. Forever removed from the "soft" pleasures of civilization, Buck...
reached the apex of his masculine flowering once he methodically stalked, killed, and ate a bull moose. When his owner was killed by a band of Native Americans, Buck took to the wilderness and joined a wolf pack for the rest of his life.66 “[T]he instincts long dead became alive again. The domesticated generations fell from him. In vague ways he remembered back to the youth of the breed, to the time the wild dogs ranged in packs through the primeval forest and killed their meat as they ran it down. [His ancestors] came to him without effort or discovery, as though they had been his always. And when, on the still cold nights, he pointed his nose at a star and howled long and wolf-like, it was his ancestors, dead and dust, pointing nose at star and howling through the centuries and through him.”67 In Edgar Rice Burroughs’s hugely successful novel *Tarzan of the Apes* (1912) the Englishman Lord Greystoke (Tarzan) was an archetype of “primitive” physicality because he was raised by apes in the “primordial” African jungle.68

Popular novels, advocates of the strenuous life, conservationists, and hunters created idealized relationships between male potency, wild animals, and open land at a historical moment when Americans wrote widely about the imminent “loss” of the wilderness frontier. Andrew Isenbern observes that this conservationist vision was uneven, particularly with respect to bison preservation: “The advocates of the preservation of the bison supported both the Euroamerican conquest of the western grasslands and the preservation of the dominant species of the preconquest plains. These contradictory ideals exemplified the dual vision of the North American frontier at the turn of the century: as a progression toward the modern age and as a refuge from modernism.”69 The turn-of-the-century railroad circus articulated this same sort of ambivalence. With trains, flying automobiles, disciplined “industrialized” workers, and confident animal trainers who wielded power over “wild” animals, the railroad circus celebrated modernization. At the same time, showmen publicly mourned urban encroachment, massive immigration, and the imminent loss of the frontier; as such, they marketed the railroad circus as a place where audiences might catch a “last glimpse” at the world’s vanishing animals and preindustrial people.

---

**DANGEROUS ANIMALS**

In a nascent celebrity culture, impresarios consciously chose adult animal males—Jumbo the elephant, Chiko the “gorilla,” and Rajah the Man-eating tiger—to become stars. A circus animal’s public profile depended on its connection to the “masculine” wilderness: the more dangerous and distant the wilderness, the more visible the animal. Domestic animals also were an integral part of many circus and Wild West acts, but the proximity of the dog, the duck, the pig, and the goose to the home meant that they never received the same degree of press attention as their more dangerous brethren.

Contemporary scientists wrote widely about the large male animal. In *Tales from Nature’s Wonderland*, the naturalist William T. Hornaday idealized the world of an ancient male mammoth who fell into the La Brea tar pits. Hornaday speculated that “Old Ganasa” (named after the elephant-headed Hindu god) and his consort “Constance” became trapped in the “Tar Terror” while trying to rescue their thirsty son “Essau,” who thought that the shimmering tarry ooze was water.39 Despite the matrilineal structure of elephant societies, Hornaday imagined the mammoths living in patriarchal nuclear families: “At Ganasa’s] heels, blindly and obediently following his lead, marched his consort Constance, who during sixty years of good and evil had faithfully followed him all the way from Mount St. Elias to the final Land of No Rain.”40 Old Ganasa, whose giant skeleton stood thirteen feet tall, was a model patriarch.

Although showmen and audiences both imagined ferocious animals as untamed representatives of a vanishing wilderness, the animals had been trained, in most cases, to replicate human movement and behavior. Regarding a twentieth-century elephant pyramid act, the anthropologist Yoram S. Carmeli argues that “these [elephant] bodies are seen as surfaced, as emptied images of real elephants,” because the stunt always framed its elephant subjects in human terms. The elephants did not perform as “natural” elephants but rather as “human” elephants because of their posture and bodily configurations.41 In 1888 the Adam Forepaugh circus introduced John L. Sullivan, the Boxing Elephant,” whose poses mimicked the famous heavyweight champion.42 Circus animals also mocked nineteenth-century notions of bodily restraint; as they imitated human postures, they behaved unpredictably, sneezing, belching, farting, and defecating without warning, thus mirroring the human body in its most natural, yet least socially regulated form.43

*King of Beasts to Clowns in Drag*
Meanwhile, “[d]ogs played dominos with equal politeness.” Ponies walked on their hind legs, carrying schoolbooks, and later executed a precise military drill. A trained rat climbed a pole and raised the American flag. But disorder beckoned. Bears and elephants entered dancing and drinking from bottles, while two goats played see-saw, one continually bouncing the other off the end of the board, “after the manners of naughty little boys.” The domino-playing dogs suddenly seemed to drop dead, only to be revived into a dancing frenzy by a monkey playing a fiddle. In a lithograph from the same circus program, an eager monkey pupil wore a sign reading “Pinch Me” on its tail while a crying pig wore a dunce cap (fig. 28). The literary critics Peter Stallybrass and Allon White write that hogs occupied an uneasy position in urbanizing societies because their fertile dung, once so useful in the rural world, was now a major source of pollution. The pig’s appearance and habits were eerily human: their pink skin resembled European pigmentation, they ate a similarly omnivorous diet, and they lived in close proximity to human beings, as they rooted around for refuse near farmhouses and in fetid city streets. (Indeed, the Maori and Polynesian term “long pig” refers to human flesh as food for cannibals.) In 1842 the New York Daily Tribune counted some ten thousand pigs ranging in the city. Susan Strasser points out that these urban hogs ate such great quantities of trash, and provided such a good food source for the impoverished, that attempts to remove them were met with organized resistance. Even into the late nineteenth century, after local sanitation laws had banished pigs from many streets, small pigsties were allowed in New York City, where tenement residents still kept pigs in their basements and apartments.

Circus acts revealed this uneasy, liminal proximity of pigs to human beings. In addition to performing as an “educated” porcine or naughty schoolboy, the circus pig played a human baby in front of unsuspecting audiences. In one enduring act, a clown tenderly nursed a fully swathed “baby” with a bottle. The gentle scene suddenly ended when the baby, now squalling, wriggled out of its swaddling blankets, urinated all over the clown, and promptly revealed its true identity. Such staged encounters perhaps had even greater resonance in an age when the spatial bifurcation of human beings and animals rendered by trains, cars, electric trolleys, bicycles, and other artifacts of modernity was seemingly growing at breakneck pace. Even as early animal welfare activists in the Gilded Age affirmed the shared sentient nature of human and animal consciousness by protesting acts of cruelty toward animals, they sought to compartmentalize human-animal encounters in the urban environment. Their efforts to retire exhausted

---

**Figure 28. “Sweet Bye & Bye,” P. T. Barnum’s Circus Museum and Menagerie, 1887.** Walking upright, riding bicycles, singing, and studying, these mostly dressed animals confounded the boundaries between human and animal. (Interior program illustration courtesy of Buffalo Bill Historical Center, Cody, Wyo., MS6, Davidson.)

[King of Beasts to Clowns in Drag]
carriage horses and chafed, bleeding cart dogs, and their push to ameliorate abominable conditions for cows and pigs traveling in unventilated railroad cars, were part of this larger project. As such, they attempted to rid the streets of strays, sickly, and dying animals by establishing new humane societies that practiced a "noisless process" of euthanasia, thus removing the troubling specter of visible suffering from the streets. They also fought to shut down unsanitary dairies and insanitary urban slaughterhouses. Edward Bellamy described a futuristic utopia set in the year 2000 wrought by centralization and mechanization in his best-selling novel Looking Backward (1888): "Ceasing to be predatory in their habits, people became co-workers, and found in fraternity, at once, the science of wealth and happiness." Likewise, animal welfare activists such as the New York shipping heir Henry Bergh (founder of the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals in 1866) imagined a time when technology would render animal labor, and hence animal cruelty, obsolete. The humane movement was therefore predicated upon a decoupling of older, everyday, utilitarian human-animal relationships, a curious "dehumanizing" of sorts, as activists fought to remove animals from the public sphere. But the pervasive presence of wandering dogs, hogs, and chickens on city streets at the turn of the century spoke to the continued presence of an older preindustrial order. The circus, with humanized animals and animalized humans, highlighted this ambiguity of modern people's position within the natural world.

The popular images of various "human" animals have their intellectual underpinnings in the Enlightenment. During this period, artists, poets and naturalists began to speculate about the common origins of human beings and other animals. The seventeenth-century French artist Charles Le Brun suggested that painters could learn to depict human emotions better by studying animals. Seventeenth-century anatomists discovered that animal physiology was remarkably close to that of humans. Voltaire and David Hume departed from Descartes's assumption that animals were simply living machines by arguing that animals, like humans, were-sentient beings. The theory of evolution, corroborated by anatomical science, cemented the physiological link between the human and the animal. Although Charles Darwin's Origin of Species (1859) made no mention of humanity's position in the natural order, his later works, The Descent of Man, and Selection in Relation to Sex (1871) and The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals (1872), asserted that humans had evolved directly from primates.

In the 1890s showmen exhibited racial difference in explicit, evolution-
in pink tutus and pose on their haunches, among other seemingly ridiculous human postures. In an attempt to thwart such criticism, Buffalo Bill's Wild West claimed that its horses were "natural": "there is absolutely no artificiality in the entire programme—the horses are as they were intended to be, and the men ride as horses should be ridden. They are not trained to act before the limelight, neither are any of them subjected to torture in order to serve the whims of their masters."  

Some defenders of the circus and Wild West show argued that animal labor was no different than human labor. In contrast to animal welfare advocates, William T. Hornaday asserted that labor for all creatures was critical for survival:

[T]here is no sound reasoning or logic assuming that the persons of animals, tame or wild, are any more sacred than those of men, women and children. We hold that it is no more "cruelty" for an ape or a dog to work in training quarters or on the stage than it is for men, women and young people to work as acrobats, or actors, or to engage in honest at eight hours per day. Who gave to any warm-blooded animal that consumes food and requires shelter the right to live without work? No. I am sure that no trained bear of my acquaintance ever had to work as hard for his food and shelter as does the average bear out in the wild... Now has he anything on the performing bear? Decidedly not.  

Despite accusations from animal welfare advocates decrying unnatural circus animal labor, the beasts offered audience members opportunities for imaginative rejuvenation: spectators could feel the rumble of a herd of elephants thundering through the big top, or smell the dung of camels and polar bears; one could actually see a tiger's muscles ripple as it jumped through a flaming hoop. With this physical proximity to potentially violent animals came the exciting specter of accidental animal escapes when the big top was blown down by a storm, or when a deadly railway accident forced cars packed with animals to lurch off the tracks. During the 1890s the Walter L. Main circus published a pamphlet which detailed its fatal railroad wreck near Tyrone, Pennsylvania, on May 30, 1893. At least five men and forty-nine horses died, and a panther, lion, tiger, zebra, yak, hyena, and scores of monkeys and elephants escaped into the countryside. The pamphlet vividly described how the loose tiger shattered the bucolic peace: "Then the untamed monster started out in the country looking for new fields. He came to the farmyard of Alfred Thomas, where a woman was milking a cow. The woman left suddenly and the tiger sprang upon the cow and killed her. He was devouring his quivering meal when the farmer appeared with his rifle and shot the tiger. Pleased with his royal sport, Farmer Thomas shouldered his rifle and started in pursuit of a panther that he knew was cavorting on the mountainside."  

Although such opportunities for hunting circus animals on the loose were rare, the circus offered its audience members the imagined pleasures of the hunt. The boy hunter at the circus was a common character in children's circus fiction. Plucky, daring orphan boys single-handedly wrangled a loose circus lion or bear before it destroyed a community. P. T. Barnum wrote several children's books featuring boy protagonists who tracked, captured, or killed wild beasts. He dedicated one of his earliest efforts, Lion Fact (1876), to "the many boys of America, who have gazed with round-eyed wonder and admiration at the wild beasts which, for their amusement and instruction, I have gathered together from all parts of the world into my menageries... I dedicate this story of a good and brave American boy, who fought with lions in their lairs and other wild animals in African jungles and Asiatic deserts, and gained much glory and wealth."  

Show programs and published manuscripts of animal agents described harrowing accounts of capturing wild animals in distant lands, an activity made all the more dangerous because animals were valuable to the circus only if captured alive. The animal dealer Charles Mayer remembered that when he captured sixty elephants running amok on a Malay sultan's territory, three Malay men—who remained nameless in his account—were killed in the process. As part of their quest to showcase male power, proprietors consciously purchased "superlative" animal specimens that were the largest, fastest, strongest, fiercest exemplars of their "race." An animal's size magnified its appeal and danger, for the animal might injure its handler, or it might escape, causing pandemonium in a peaceful town. Strength, musculature, size, and ferocity were all signs of superlative animal manhood. In the winter of 1861–82, P. T. Barnum created a public uproar in England when he purchased Jumbo, a towering African elephant living at the London Zoo. When Jumbo initially refused to board the ship on which he was to be taken to the United States, the British press wrote of Jumbo's "desire" to remain in London, consequently sparking an unsuccessful nationwide letter-writing campaign for Jumbo to stay. Captured as a baby by Arab hunters in Abyssinia in 1861, Jumbo was still growing when he reached the United States in 1882 (plate 4).  

Jumbo, the "Lord of All the Beasts," was portrayed as a model of manly kindness who—despite his power and potential fury—allowed children to
ride him. Show programs chronicled his altruistic character, especially after his sudden death in 1885. Just hours after a performance at St. Thomas, Ontario, Jumbo sacrificed his own life to save his best friend, Tom Thumb, a dwarf clown elephant, and his keeper, Matthew Scott, out of the path of an oncoming train. Jumbo was crushed and dead within minutes. P. T. Barnum recounted Jumbo’s bravery in a melodramatic children’s story in which he took three small children (Tom, Trixie, and Gay) to his circus. “Who was Jumbo?” asked Trixie. ‘Oh, a tremendous elephant as big as six of these rolled into one! He went to Canada, and there locomotive smashed into his brain, and he turned over and died. But first he wrapped his trunk around the baby elephant and flung him safe off the track,’ [said Tom]. ‘Good Jumbo!’ said Gay with a smile; but there were tears in Trixie’s eyes. ‘Yes, baby; and that’s the way we would jump for you in any danger,’ added Tom.”

Depicting the fatal collision between Jumbo and the train as the inevitable triumph of industrial technology over nature, program engravings portrayed the elephant as many times larger than the train: “The levitation of the rail and the mountain of bone and brawn came together with a crash that made the solid road-bed quake. The heavy iron bars of the engine’s side were broken and twisted as if they had been but grape vines.” After hiring the scientists Henry A. Ward and Carl Akeley to prepare the elephant corpse, Barnum profitably exhibited Jumbo’s massive hide and “majestic” skeleton in the name of scientific uplift along his transcontinental route.

Perhaps best known for his “marriage” to Johanna the eurasian gorilla in 1893, Chiko the chimpanzee was marketed as insatiable, athletic, and racially “black.” One scientist, R. L. Garner, stated that Chiko was “several inches taller than the best” he had ever seen and the “finest specimen” of his “race”—albeit official scientific opinion was divided regarding Chiko’s actual “race” was he a chimpanzee, a “black” orangutan, a gorilla, or of mixed descent? Or might he be human? One thing is certain in hindsight: Chiko was no gorilla, because circuses did not acquire genuine gorillas until 1919. Zoologists noted that Chiko’s thumbs—unlike those of other apes—were virtually human, and that he could probably learn to play the piano and bass. Garner tried to prompt Chiko to speak in order to record his voice. Chiko, “a perfect gentleman unless otherwise provoked,” roared in response. Agents further identified Chiko as a “missing link” by conjuring racially charged stories about his political “career” in Africa before capture. They based these tales upon the observations of a fictitious traveler in the Congo who noted that Chiko had been an alderman in the wild. The trader also reported that Chiko possessed prodigious strength and appetite, and could eat dozens of apples followed by a swallow of coffee. Press agents also noted impassively that Chiko’s high social rank in the Congo made him a “society favorite” in the United States.

Speculation regarding Chiko’s racial “purity” became especially intense when Chiko was “married” to Johanna—whose “race” was also in question. The wedded chimps were a metaphor for contemporary discourses about race and the permissible bounds of racial “mixing,” given the frequent references to couple’s plans to procreate. After Chiko’s untimely death in 1894 (from “a surfeit of apples”), he was stuffed and displayed at the American Museum of Natural History. Posed in a standing position with his “strong” right arm extended, Chiko wore a wistful expression. His bones had been replaced by wood, and his skeleton was on exhibit nearby.

Because Chiko was the “finest specimen of his race,” showmen promoted him as an archetypal chimpanzee (or gorilla or orangutan, depending upon one’s scientific opinion). Donna Haraway observes that turn-of-the-century zoologists commonly hunted for adult male animals as “typical” representatives of their species. As such, Chiko symbolized virile manhood, capable obliterating the bars of his cage and terrorizing his keeper. Advertising Chiko as an African “statesman,” circus proprietors endowed the chimp with some physical qualities that contemporary EuroAmerican racial theorists bestowed upon black men. One lithograph from 1893 (the same year that Chiko was added to the menagerie) depicts an unnamed gorilla, incorrectly listed as an orangutan, walking upright, wielding a rock in one hand, and holding a frightened white woman under his other arm: “Just secured and now added. A Giant Black Orang...more closely resembling man than any other creature known to exist using knives, forks, cups and other articles in precisely the same manner as a human being. The veritable missing link” (fig. 29). Chiko, like Johanna, performed next to Africans at the Ethnological Congress. Haraway argues that in death, animals could be manipulated, through the process of taxidermy, into imagined natural perfection, offering museum and circus patrons “a peephole into the jungle.” In addition, she postulates that “taxidermy fulfills the fatal desire to represent, to be whole; it is a politics of reproduction.” At museums and circuses, showmen and taxidermists “reproduced” dioramas of dead animals to fashion an idealized natural world where males were physically superior to females, even though androgynous living animals like Chiko’s strong “wife” Johanna confounded such normative notions.

Early-twentieth-century animal photographers also used the dangerous
large male as their primary "representative," subject just as dear hunters and animal lovers photographed and filmed in Africa at the turn of the century, by the late Mr. and Mrs. Sanborn, now at the New York Zoological Society, are shown in a photograph of the author at the San Francisco Zoological Society.

The author's interest in animal welfare began early in his career, when he worked with the San Francisco Zoological Society and the San Francisco Museum of Natural History. He was a frequent contributor to the society's annual report, and his articles and lectures were widely read and appreciated.

The author's early work focused on the welfare of animals in captivity, and he was particularly interested in the care and treatment of animals used in circuses and other performances. He was a strong advocate for the humane treatment of animals, and his work had a significant impact on the field of animal welfare.

The author's later work focused on the natural history of the American West, and he wrote extensively about the region's wildlife and landscapes. He was a respected authority on the subject, and his work continues to be widely read and appreciated today.
trainers, referred to his circus animals as "untamed men and women" and contended: "The training of my dumb companions is never cruel—less so... than the firmness exercised occasionally in the correction of an evilly disposed child." Similarly, Carl Hagenbeck spoke of people from countries where he captured untamed animals as "uncivilized... no less wild than the beasts" with which they worked. This juxtaposition of the human and animal made the trope of the white man's burden visually complete, as people of color and beasts were "trained" together for profit and ostensible edification.

Although performances with animals highlighted the biological interconnectedness of the animal and the human, trainers took pride in their "mastery" over beasts. As models of disciplined manliness, animal trainers argued that absolute sobriety was an essential part of their craft. Boston emphasized that the trainer had to be on the job around the clock. Carnivores, for one, had to be trained at night, because these nocturnal predators were dull and lazy during the day. Boston noted that successful trainers—einem even when injured—were always calm, adding that the first principle of training a wild animal was "never let an animal know his [own] power." Boston added that a trainer must never lie down when working with an animal, that only the upright trainer was master. On the ground he became fair game for attack.

Showmen juxtaposed the trainer's detached calm with the omnipresence of animal dangers. In an interview for the Detroit Free Press in 1890, George Conklin, a lion tamer, nonchalantly introduced the reporter to the menagerie: "These are the man-eating tigers of India... They are full grown and in the prime of life. The one with a chain on his neck has lately killed his man... Yes, indeed. These are the genuine killers. Do not go too near the cages. They have a fearfully long and sudden reach." Newspaper articles focused upon the male trainer's stoicism when he was injured in front of an audience. Still, women and men both obeyed the circus's ethos of "the show must go on," regardless of the severity of one's wounds. When Jack Bonavita was mauled by a group of lions in Indianapolis in 1900, he coolly shoved the handle of his whip down one cat's throat and shouted commands at the others, and all continued their tricks. The audience roared approvingly, but after four stunts Bonavita bowed gracefully, staggered off stage, and was whisked off to the hospital. The journalist Cleveland Moffett noted that "Bonavita's steady nerve saved him."

Whereas the circus cultivated the erotic image of women animal trainers, male trainers were marketed as models of manly stoicism. Usually dressed in khaki or formal wear, male trainers did not encounter the same kinds of problems as women trainers, who were often forced to wear impractical, flabby dress. In the second decade of the twentieth century, Mabel Stark, for one, was required to don an awkward feather headdress during a lion act with the AI G. Barnes circus. Attracted to the birdlike movement of the headdress, the lion pounced on Stark and cut a five-inch gash on her head.

By contrast, prominent trainers who worked exclusively with domestic animals were not marketed as quintessential "manly" men. Their acts were intended to be humorous, not death defying. Al Foy, a dog trainer with Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey, was never advertised as "fearless" or "mystical." Instead, his billing focused on the funny, human exploits of his dogs. "Dogs that actually think and reason. Introducing "Toque" who rides, laps and juggles like a man; and "Chiquita," the clown-dog whose real sense of humor will merit your closest attention." Emil Patterson, who trained brown bears, was similarly invisible as he worked with "[w]onderful acrobatic cycle-riding, rope-walking bears" seemingly devoid of virile ferocity, just as the cuddly "teddy bear" (a national craze modeled after Theodore Roosevelt beginning in 1906) rendered the potentially lethal bear into a child's toy.

As an arbiter of nature, the trainer commanded predator and prey animals to perform together as friends in the biblically evocative "happy family" act (plate 5). In reality, though, the trainer's skill had little to do with the animals' docility: they had been fed so thoroughly that they were little danger to each other. At the turn of the century, Frank Bostock trained lions, tigers, hyenas, sloth bears, polar bears, and Tibetian bears to work together with their respective enemies. Bostock proclaimed mixed-group training "wonderful," because "[t]he animals] have been subjected to this gross indignity by the superiority of man." Captain Jack Bonavita, a pupil of Bostock, exhibited twenty-seven lions at once in 1900. Reportedly, Theodore Roosevelt admired Bonavita's simultaneous mastery over "twenty-seven kings of the forest."

The trainer became master of life and death when animals became violent or, in circus parlance, "went bad." The trainer either banished the animal through permanent caging (the commonest punishment) or arranged the offender's execution. Bostock observed that "going bad" was an occasional and inexplicable part of the aging process that only struck a few species, most commonly lions, tigers, and elephants. Advertisements lured spectators to see these rogue animals with lurid stories about man-eaters. One headline roared: "Fierce Battle for Life of Boy Crushed in Assassin Tiger's
“Jaws,” after Frank Bostock’s tiger, Rajah, broke loose in New York City in 1901, then killed and partially ate a sixteen-year-old boy. The article continued, “[Rajah the tiger] cannot understand why the dainty morsels which pass and re-pass the cage in the form of exclamatory, admiring women cannot be thrown to him as choice tidbits. But Rajah is doomed to a life of enforced abstinence, for even the bloodless pleasures of other days are to be denied him.”

The execution of an intractable circus elephant, or “bull,” was the least common but most spectacular instance of the animal trainer’s ultimate power. Pachyderms “gone bad” were put to death by firing squad, poison, or strangulation. On October 8, 1888, the Adam Forepaugh circus publically strangled Chief Forepaugh, a forty-year-old elephant, after he killed seven men during several rampages in Philadelphia, Grand Rapids, Michigan, Topeka, Kansas, and Akron, Ohio, where he temporarily “took possession” of the town. Circus workers strangled Chief by tying a noose around his neck and attaching the ropes to elephants on either side of him who then moved in opposite directions. Like other dead circus animals, Chief was taken to a scientific institution, in this case the University of Pennsylvania, where he was skinned, stuffed, and studied.

P. T. Barnum recounted that Albert, “a very large and treacherous Asiatic elephant,” was sentenced to death after he killed one of his keepers in 1885. On July 20, Albert was publicly executed on the outskirts of Keene, New Hampshire. The elephant was chained to four trees, the location of his heart and brain were marked with chalk. Thirty-three members of the Keene Light Guard stood in line at sixteen paces, and at the word of their commanding officer, fired at Albert, who collapsed without a struggle. His remains were donated to the Smithsonian Institution.

After Adam Forepaugh donated Tip the elephant to the Central Park Zoo in 1889, Tip continued to terrorize (and kill) several keepers. Finally deemed “bad” by his last keeper, William Snyder, Tip was publicly poisoned in May 1894. The New York Times covered the graphic scene: “In his paroxysm he whirled about the little limits of his cage, reared his great body against the heavy timbers, and charged upon [the crowd] with his blunt tusks. He raised his trunk high into the air and trumpeted in agony. From his mouth he spouted big drops of blood, and then, gathering himself with all his might, he made one dash toward the rear of his pen, beyond which lay the green lawn of the Park. Chains that bound him broke like springs, and he was almost free. But the poison was doing its work, and when the monster seemed sure to dash himself against the outer cell wall, upon the chain which still held fast about his foot he tripped. It stopped him in his rush.”

Ted Owby has written that the elephant execution represents a ghoulish metaphor for lynching—a form of violent community spectacle. Proprietors often depicted the elephant as racially “black.” Exported from Africa or India, elephants portrayed “savage” masculinity in its largest mammalian form. Osa and Martin Johnson blamed the African elephant’s intractability on the African man, who they claimed was too “uncivilized” to domesticate the elephant, unlike the “more advanced” Asian races: “Is it any wonder that the African elephant has also remained a savage, when the members of the human race that reside near him fall so low in the scale of man?”

Showmen attributed the elephant’s crazy behavior to “must,” a frenzied sexual state that made the elephant combustible. Euroamerican discourses about black men similarly articulated the imagined dangers of black male sexuality in an explosion of racist scholarship at the turn of the century: Charles Carroll, The Negro a Beast (1900); William B. Smith, The Color Line: A Brief in Behalf of the Unborn (1905); and Robert Shufeldt, The Negro, a Menace to American Civilization (1907). According to Bederman, white southern men saw the powerful fiction of the “Negro rapist” as an enormous threat to their manhood, their communities, and “civilization.” A record number of 161 recorded lynchings occurred in 1892, and actual numbers were undoubtedly higher. Nevertheless, most African American victims of the lynch mob were never accused of rape. Many were murdered because they were an economic threat to local white businesses. The circus elephant sexually run amok, as well as the financially successful African American man and the fiction of black sexual prowess, symbolized a threat to Euroamerican community order.

MANLINESS UNDER THE BIG TOP

Wearing thin tights and a leotard, the male big-top player’s body was always in plain view. As P. T. Barnum suggested, the circus’s visual exhibition of the disciplined, athletic male body provided an excellent lesson in virtue for the young boy. “[T]he [circus] athlete demonstrates the perfection of training of which the human body is capable. His feats of strength and graceful agility please the understanding as well as the eye, and if the average small boy does stand on his head and practice turning ‘hand-springs’ and ‘flip-
flaps' with exasperating persistence for three weeks running after going to the circus his physique will be all the better for it."  

The flying trapeze replicated contemporary thrills such as balloon flights, mountain climbing, and the nascent sport of flying an airplane. Originally popularized by the French physical-education teacher and impresario Jen Léotard in the 1850s (whose tight costuming still bears his name), the flying trapeze transformed its practitioners into somersaulting, muscular missiles through space. Programs described Charles Siegrist's stunts as "daring displays of unrivaled accomplishments," "startling feats of skill and sureness . . . defying the laws of gravitation." But the program left it at that: a stark contrast to their treatment of big-top women, whose family-centered origins in show business were highly touted, press releases and programs paid little attention to Siegrist's life outside the ring. His life story mimicked the individualistic, manly "rags to riches" trope of several circus owners. Born in a covered wagon on the Oregon Trail in 1880, Siegrist (whose original surname was Patterson) was orphaned as a young child. Supporting himself as a newspaper seller, young Charles, who had a severe speech impediment, attracted his customers' attention by doing acrobatic tricks on street corners. As a nine-year-old he was recruited to become a blackface minstrel performer with the O'Brien Brothers, and in 1898 James A. Bailey contracted him to work for the Barnum & Bailey circus, where he stayed until 1931. Charles adopted the surname of his mentor, the trapeze artist Toto Siegrist, shortly after he joined the circus. Until his death in 1953, Siegrist was an active part of the outfit, even after suffering a broken neck.

Asian bodily stunts tapped into stereotypic "oriental" practices, notably trellising and sleeping on the proverbial bed of nails. Japanese, Arab, Chinese, and South Asian acrobats commonly played scenes of imagined bodily torture. Japanese acrobats frequently exhibited the perch act, a harrowing stunt involving several people, often whole families: one artist balanced a pole or ladder upon his shoulders or forehead, and smaller players—usually children—climbed the object in balance and performed acrobatics and balancing stunts in midair. In 1894 Okeo Akimoto ascended a ladder of swords with bare feet. Arab troupes—often simply called Bedouins—executed a series of impressive ground acts that included leaping, somersaulting, and the aptly named reversed pyramid building, a stunt which required one person to hold up several others in an inverted triangle: a world turned upside down (plate 6).

At Carl Hagenbeck's Greater Shows in 1907, press agents unveiled Poline, the famous Hindoo Fakir, who could lift sixty-pound weights with his eyelid. A picture depicted Poline with a rope attached to his "muscular" eyelid, which was connected to a small child positioned at his feet, whom he would later lift. A Barnum & Bailey lithograph from 1916 depicts the members of a Chinese troupe of acrobats calmly sipping tea while being suspended by their hair (fig. 30). Tiny Kline watched Chinese aerial acrobats tumble in "tortuous" poses wearing "kaleidoscopic" costumes, while juggling plates on strawlike sticks. The wives of the Chinese acrobats participated in the act's finale.

Each couple sat down to a small table to which the chairs were attached at the base, facing each other and a tea service before them. Two ropes were lowered from a crane-bar overhead as the assistant passed the
look attached to the rope, through the tightly braided and twisted knob
of hair of each, while man and wife inter-locked their legs under the table.
At the signal of the equestrian director’s whistle, all three couples were
hoisted in the air; joined by their legs they appeared to be sitting relaxed
on the chairs, though actually being suspended by their hair,—supporting
the weight of the table as well... With the pulling of the scalp
affecting the facial expression, it took on a look of fright, as if they had
suddenly seen a ghost. Sitting there in the air, they poured and sipped
their tea as though they enjoyed the party... meanwhile, four of their
companions were being hoisted up at various points along the track to the
ropes, stretched from the top of quarter poles at far ends of the big top,
down toward the center, and as the tea-party was lowered to the ground,
down came these four flying Chinamen in a “slide for life”—suspended
by their queues; each carrying the American flag in one hand, the Chi-
inese flag in the other, thus assuring themselves of applause which I am
sure they would have earned even without “presenting colors.”

The majority of circus contortionists were Euroamerican men, but they
were often racially masked, labeled as “indiarubber men” or “klaaschneigers”
(after a famous European, Edward Klischning, who played an ape in En-
lish theaters and circuses in the 1830s). J. H. Walter, an Englishman also
known as the “Serpent-man,” was an internationally renowned contortion-
ist in the 1880s whose writhing flexibility enabled him to bend backward
with his head peering out between his feet; in this position (known as the
Marinelli bend), Walter clenched a mouth grip and lifted his body into the
air without the use of his hands. An interviewer once pressed Walter to re-
veal whether women found him irresistible given his ability to bend his body
into such unusual positions; Walter sadly replied that his severe bodily
regimen had rendered him weak and impotent: “Sir, the chastity which monks
do not always observe is forced upon an artist of my class... I have all the
appearance of a strong man; my chest is wider than your own, but beneath
it I conceal the lungs of a child; they are stunted by the daily pressure of my
thoracic cage.”

As a site for remarkable bodily contortions, the big top was also home to
gender ambiguity and play. Even though showmen valorized brawny male
performers, big-top acrobats—both men and women—were most success-
ful if they were petite. As a result, their virtually identical dress and similar
degrees of masculinity made male and female big-top athletes androgynous.
In England, the voyeuristic barrister Arthur Munby was mesmer-
ized by watching "feminized" men such as Jean Léotard work the single trapeze. Moreover, explicit drag acts had long been part of the American circus. In the 1840s, Robert Stickney introduced "The Frolics of My Granny," in which an old woman wearing a bonnet and skirt rode into the arena with a bouncy and fidgety young boy on her shoulders. Suddenly, the old woman and the boy were cast aside—revealed to be a wicker frame—and the human mass was transformed into a single male rider in tights. In 1859 G. A. Farini, a wire walker and also a circus manager, walked across Niagara Falls on a cable while dressed as Biddy O'Flaherty, an Irish washerwoman who laundered clothes as she made the treacherous crossing. In the 1870s Farini's adopted son, El Nino, wore drag as Lulu, a popular lecher who catapulted twenty-five feet into the air off a hidden springboard. Wearing drag, Fred Biggs opened the big-top program for Sells-Floto in 1913 as "The Initial Laugh. . . . He is the only man on the American continent who can by his solitary efforts, entertain such a vast gathering as daily visits the Sells-Floto Circus. Watch for Biggs. You'll laugh at him. You can't help it. Fun is his middle name and he'd bring a chuckle to a man with the mumps." A duping of an audience of gullible rubes was an integral part of drag's pleasures. Route books and newspaper articles documented male riders and acrobats who enjoyed standing in for female colleagues suddenly taken ill. At the Ringling Bros. circus at Watertown, South Dakota, June 1892, the route book noted: "Blanche Reed having measles, Mike Rooney [a fellow rider] substitutes. With curly wig and cheeks like two blush roses, with corset upside down and dainty dress of taffy-candy pink, Mike looked too sweet for anything. Made a hit with his bow. Did splendid." At the Barnum & Bailey production at Chicago in October 1904, Jeremy Silbon substituted for an ill female trapeze artist. According to the Chicago Daily Journal, "When the big audiences at the Barnum & Bailey show are applauding the daring mid-air performances of Mademoiselle Cleveland and voting that she is the prettiest girl in the show, that 'young woman' is enjoying the joke. . . . [She is] in reality, a fine healthy boy." As an itinerant amusement that attracted outsiders, the circus generally accepted drag artists. Georgie Lake, a transvestite, worked comfortably at the couth show in the years surrounding World War I. Players like Bertie "Slats" Beeson, a wire walker with the Ringling Bros and Barnum & Bailey circus, slipped into male and female personas with ease, inside and outside the canvas big top. As "the world's only aerial dancer, the madcap of the wire-running, dancing, leaping, swinging, pirouetting on a slender thread of steel," Beeson in his act did not betray his "real" gender. Tom Barron, "the World's Tallest Clown," recalls that "[Beeson] was a female impersonator, but he wasn't feminine acting at all, in fact, he was captain of the baseball team. A terrific guy, he was really funny." But Beeson's female impersonator act, along with Albert Hodgini's role as "Miss Daisy" (described in chapter 4), do speak to the existence of a larger, vibrant drag culture in the early twentieth century. The female impersonator Julian Eltinge advanced his vaudeville and movie career by publishing the Julian Eltinge Magazine and Beauty Hints, which provided eager female consumers with advice on cosmetics and clothing. Drag played an important role in the saloons, resorts, live sex shows, dance halls, and dime museums of the Bowery in New York City. George Chauncey suggests that drag was but one part of a complex "gay world" in the early twentieth century. He argues that "fairies," "inverts," "female impersonators," and "traders" were more broadly accepted in the first third of the twentieth century than in subsequent decades, in part because contemporary scientific and popular constructions of an intermediate "third sex" made homosexuals less threatening to standard male codes. "[The fairy] was so obviously a third-sexer," a different species of human being, that his very effeminacy served to confirm rather than threaten the masculinity of other men. . . . Their representation of themselves as 'intermediate types' made it easier for men to interact with them (and even have sex with them) by making it clear who would play the 'man's part' in the interaction." In this environment, Eltinge, Hodgini, and Beeson enjoyed a wide audience. The breadth of circus drag stars was especially remarkable because they brought aspects of this urban gay world to isolated rural areas. Chauncey suggests that popular notions of the "third sex" allowed a man to participate in this rich and fluid gay world without being stigmatized as "deviant," "so long as he abided by masculine gender conventions." The theater historian Laurence Senelick notes that Eltinge "normalized" his drag act by behaving "like a man" offstage. Hodgini and Beeson remained at the center of the circus community, in large part because they conformed to social norms—married with children, captain of the baseball team—once they left the ring.

CLOWNS

Cad in pancake white and sleek jester garb, or in big, baggy clothes, huge shoes, a tiny hat, and a gigantic nose, the clown toddled around the big top,
childishly teasing the ringmaster. An essential part of the circus since its American arrival in the late eighteenth century, the clown “interfered with” the serious acts and “covered” for workers setting up another act or players who were unexpectedly injured. Unlike those male players whose manliness was augmented by staged encounters with fierce animals, the clown usually worked with relatively harmless creatures: pigs, mules, geese, and pigeons. Jules Turnour and Emmett Kelly, among others, took up clowning because their bodies could no longer handle the physical strain of acrobatics, contortionism, and riding; in many cases the clown, in contrast to other, more athletic big-top performers, represented the male body in physical decline.

With historical roots in traveling medieval troupes and the European tradition of the court jester, clowns worked a variety of raucous acts. They played in big, off-key clown bands during the concert, did solo acts under the big top, danced in drag at the cooch show, and played in sprawling big-top clown congresses. In addition, several accomplished riders and acrobats played clownish roles in floppy garb and occasional pancake. Like the “genuine” clown, these comic riders mocked conventional norms, staging spastic and undignified acrobatics on a horse’s rump.

No one particular look characterized the clown; each clown’s costuming and makeup style served as his distinctive trademark (fig. 81). Al Miano, for example, was a traditional “whiteface” clown and dressed as a Shakespearean jester, wearing cap and bells. Although covered in clown white his facial features essentially remained his own. He performed over-the-top caricatures of bodily containtment and cultural refinement. By contrast, the auguste clown, also known as the “proper clown,” who appeared in or out of whiteface, burlesqued his body with an exaggerated nose, mouth, eyes, and ears, shaggy hair, and decrepit, oddly sized, zany, too-bright clothes. Whitefaced clowns often performed with their auguste counterparts in what Paul Bouissac calls a dichotomy of “culture” versus “nature”: the suave whitefaced clown playing the violin, for instance, while the dirty auguste clown frolics around the big top making music with a rubber glove that he has just pretended was a cow’s udder.195 The presence of animals augmented the centrality of displacement and liminality to clowning. Physically masked, the clown worked with the stubborn, humorous mule, neither horse nor donkey, and the pig, a fully liminal, fully humanized animal at the circus. He also drove ungainly teams of ostriches instead of horses. Clowning often blended with the sideshow as giants, midgets, and other players with physical abnormalities often played clowns. In the 1920s Ernie Burt dressed in drag, complete with enormous rubbery breasts, gowns, gaudy pancake makeup, and a big, blonde wig, a la Mae West; in the auguste tradition, Lou Jacobs also worked in drag, wielding an overgrown baby carriage in his act, sometimes with dachshund in tow. The oddly shaped “wiener dog” enhanced the act’s subversive look.

By the turn of the century, the clown’s act had become almost purely visual. His voice could no longer be heard amid the din of three rings and two stages of activity under the cavernous big top.196 This silent “joey” (a generic term derived from the name of the eighteenth-century English clown Joey Grimaldi) was a throwback to clowning’s antecedents in European pantomime. The “talking clown” had been an integral part of the American circus until Barnum & Bailey instituted the three-ring standard for the
largest circuses in 1881. At the one-ring show, the talking clown “guayed” (teased) the ringmaster, made jokes about local politics and current national news, sang comic tunes, and often spoke several languages to satisfy polyglot immigrant communities. In the cozy atmosphere of the forty-two-foot circle, the talking clown maintained an intimate relationship with his audience. A French immigrant, Jules Turnour, clowned for small wagon shows before joining the Ringling Bros. in 1889. He recalled his earliest days at the one-ring circus and his constant, mad-dash preparations to tailor each performance to its specific location: “The tents were not nearly so large as they are now and you could talk to your audience and be readily understood. Accordingly, I made haste, as soon as I reached a town, to get a local newspaper, find out what was going on, and then I made a reference to it in my clownering. It never failed to please the spectators.” The most famous talking clown in American circus history was the whiteface clown Dan Rice (1825–1900), who started out as a puppeteer in Reading, Pennsylvania and then moved on to a trained pig act before becoming a clown. During his heyday in the 1860s and 1870s, Rice reportedly earned $1,000 a week. He also worked in blackface and was an accomplished rider. Wearing colorful tights, puffy shorts, and a leopard top for his clown act, Rice exuded dexterity and excellent comic timing. Although a few publications (Porter’s Spirit of the Times, for one) found Rice’s poor grammar and general lack of education objectionable, he generally remained popular with the American public during the antebellum and Civil War eras—some, however, called Rice a traitor for playing both sides of the Mason-Dixon Line during the war.

Rice’s connection to blackface was his strongest connection to turn-of-the-century clownering. Stuart Thayer suggests that minstrelsy had its beginnings at the circus, and that the two amusements overlapped considerably during the nineteenth century. As part of his repertoire of comic songs, George Nichols gave what the program listed as a “minstrel scene, titled Jim Crow,” at J. Purdy Brown’s circus in 1831. The plantation slave, “Jim Crow,” and the urban dandy, “Zip Coon,” were stock circus minstrelsy characters and soon became central parts of the new antebellum minstrel show. Drag minstrel characters also had an early home at the circus: Daniel Gardner played a “wench dancer” named “Miss Dinah Crow” at the Green & Waring’s Eagle Circus in 1836. Not surprisingly, many antebellum minstrel players began their careers as circus clowns. Eric Lott writes that the American clown—particularly the Auguste clown—borrowed heavily from the slave trickster, an integral figure in the African American folk narrative tradition. The clown, along with the trickster, depicted “lovable butts of humor and devious producers of humor.” Both stood as champions of the weak who slyly defeated the strong through sheer wit.

As the clown harmlessly tottered around the big top, he deflated the ringmaster’s pretentious presentation. He seemingly sabotaged the musically orchestrated precision of the three-ring whirl just as the blackface minstrel performers constantly “guayed” the highfalutin interlocutor. Jules Turnour described a typical clown stunt, the “January Act,” in which a lowly clown character named January trades a mule for the ringmaster’s fine horse. When the mule refuses to budge for the exasperated ringmaster, he pays the clown to take the obdurate mule away. The obstinate, sneaky clown dupes the ringmaster into giving him the horse, the mule, and money.

In the “Peter Jenkins Act,” a star female bareback rider was suddenly unable to appear in the ring because a horse had kicked her backside. Meanwhile, her beautiful “rosin back” pranced riderless around the arena. Upon hearing the announcement that Mademoiselle La Blanche would not appear, a drunk rose from the crowd and stumbled down to the ringmaster with booze in hand, loudly condemning the program a bust. The ringmaster challenged the drunk to ride the horse. The drunk readily accepted and mounted clumsily. As he lurched forward, his ragged clothes suddenly fell off, revealing a graceful body in tights and spangles that proceeded to perform complicated bareback acrobatics. The audience roared with approval, greatly enjoying their having been duped. Mark Twain’s Huck Finn also eagerly witnessed this act: “[The acrobat] just stood up there a-sailing around as easy and comfortable as if he wasn’t ever drunk in his life—and then he began to pull off his clothes and sling them. . . . And, then, there was, slim and handsome, and dressed the gaudiest and prettiest you ever saw, and he lit into that horse with his whip and made him fairly hum—and finally skipped off, and made his bow and danced off to the dressing-room, and everybody just a-hollering with pleasure and astonishment.”

Riding mules instead of horses, clowns dressed as policemen in ratty clothes, with a big, lopsided badge, sooty black face, and pendulous abdomen. At Trenton, New Jersey, in 1907, a press release disguised as a newspaper article further poked fun at law enforcement. The “article” announced: “Scene at the Barnum & Bailey Circus Not on Real Program.” While watching the clown number, “Clarence the Cop Chasing a Tramp,” two Trenton officers reportedly moved quickly in to help their “colleague” arrest the “criminal.” Clowns also worked in a large group for the big-top fire number,” in which they crazily pretended to douse a fire while
impersonating fire chiefs and lieutenants. On one level, it would seem that such impersonations were harmlessly gentle celebrations of a world turned upside down, as childlike clowns tottered around playing big in oversized "grownup" clothes on Circus Day. But these acts could also be read as carnivalesque inversions. Dating back to medieval and early modern Europe, clowns lewdly impersonated the clergy and nobility at annual feasts and fairs.58 Circus clowns underscored local authorities’ very real ineptitude in controlling large crowds; their stunt, then, can also be interpreted as a critique of social surveillance. Such was the case with a melee at Buffalo Bill’s Wild West in Brooklyn, New York, in 1892. The Brooklyn Citizen reported that the lone police officer on the scene cautiously poked his head out from behind a canvas tent, but then “made up his mind that he was not wanted, and withdrew his head. When a bystander went to call him, he had disappeared.”59 Still, local police commonly targeted circus workers as the sole perpetrators of community disorder rather than focus on members of the crowd.60

Because the clown’s precise identity was often ambiguous, he represented what Raymond Williams has called “structures of feeling.” In other words, the clown embodied “a kind of feeling and thinking which is indeed social and material, but each in an embryonic phase before it can become fully articulate and defined exchange.”61 By tapping into “structures of feeling,” clowns often played unconscious racial stereotypes that helped reinforce social norms. Some circus programs contained portraits of clowns in literal blackface, with huge red mouths and bulging eyes, strumming energetically on a banjo, but often the auguste clown’s blackface was metaphorical. He created his racial identity through the act of “whitening up” with thick pancake. His greasy whiteness and exaggerated bodily zones—huge red mouth, lolling, paint-encircled eyes, big fake nose, ears, and feet—made his look strikingly similar to blackface. Showmen played upon this visual connection by arguing that African American men literally were clowns because of their supposed affinity for clowning and the circus. The Ringling Bros’ route book from 1895 and 1896 contained a section, “The Plantation Darkey at the Circus,” which imagined—in almost orgasmic language—black men as minstrel characters.

[“The great American “nigger” has a laugh not only his own but one that owns him as well. In the presence of the clown he and the laugh are firmly bound together. They can’t get away from one another; not the nigger and the laugh! Oh, no! It is with him under every inch of his black skin, in every nerve, muscle, sinew, even in his bones. Every atom in his body responds to it. It wiggles his toes, bends his knees, puts a double-action, spring-hinge in his back and electrifies his whole being with the most exquisite emotions of a tickling which, as his burnt-cork counterfeit would remark, ‘Can’t be scratched.’ It does everything to him but to take the kinks out of his hair. At times it leaps out of his capacious mouth, like a flame of fire . . . and just as you think it is getting away from him for good and all, back it darts through the white archway of his dental orifice into his interior regions way out of sight, but not out of evidence, for you can see it bulge out his ribs and you wonder why he doesn’t explode.”62

Proponents further conflated the African American man and the clown by arguing that both were completely controlled by their emotions, not reason. Superlative examples of white manhood—the big cat tamer, the wire walker, and so forth—demonstrated little emotion during life-threatening acts. The clown, by contrast, howled in mock fear when he saw a mouse, or shrieked in pain at a mosquito bite. Showmen characterized male African American spectators in a similar vein as giddy and superstitious. The Ringling route book stated: “The animals in the menagerie, usually considered an instructive feature of a circus, are to the negro weird beings from a world rather more remote than the sun or moon . . . his particular horror is the snake . . . [If a lion roars] [o]ne negro shouts, ‘He’s loose,’ and instantly the thousands of assembled black people take up the cry of ‘He’s loose,’ and stampeded. It makes no difference who ‘he’ is that is ‘loose,’ they run like mad, men, women, children, shouting, ‘He’s loose, he’s loose, he’s loose. In every direction they scatter.”63

Actual big-top acts made this rhetorical relationship between the clown and the African American complete. In 1888 Eph Thompson trained the elephant John L. Sullivan at the Adam Forepaugh circus. Wearing a boxing glove at the end of his trunk, the elephant sparred with Thompson in the ring and frequently "punched" him so hard that Thompson went flying over the ring bank.64 Unlike the white trainer who dominated powerful animals, Thompson played a clownish coward—constantly vanquished by the box-ag pachyderm—and consequently remained unthreatening to Euroamerican audiences. Yet Thompson still had a difficult time finding employment with American shows. As a result, he moved to Europe where his career flourished.

In line with the tenets of nineteenth-century romantic racialism, show-
men's portrayals of black men and clowns reflected contemporary representations of white women: late-nineteenth-century scientists argued that "excessive" emotionalism defined women, racial "savages," and children of all races. The German Darwinist Ernst Haeckel and the Americans Edward Drinker Cope and G. Stanley Hall were all proponents of recapitulation theory, positing that every organism repeats the life history of its "race" within its own lifetime, evolving through the less developed forms of its ancestors on its path to maturity. They contended that Euroamerican women and "primitives" remained mentally and emotionally fixed in lower ancestral stages of evolution. Accordingly, only white boys were physiologically and mentally capable of reaching the highest stages of racial and gender development as fully evolved men. This line of thought used pseudoempirical phrenological evidence to claim that African American men were perpetually emotional and juvenile, just like the clown.  

The painted clown acted out childish behaviors and infantile pleasures. He revelled in dirt, cried freely, openly adored the serious "adult" acts, and played physical pranks on everybody, from ringmaster to the audience. Playing a hobo (popularized most fully by Emmett Kelly's "Willie" tramp character during the Depression, when at times nearly one-quarter of the American workforce was unemployed), the auguste clown's persona was defined by dirt. Laughing loudly at the clown's antics perhaps transported audiences back to the unrestrained pleasures of their own collective infancy and childhood. More than a "low Other" who simply represented a tantalizing version of what they were not, the unfettered clown symbolized what clock-bound, alienated adult Euroamerican men perhaps felt they had lost.

Playing European ethnic characters, clowns portrayed preindustrial dupes, perpetually bumbling with the fast, sophisticated pace of urban American life. The idea of racial whiteness itself was hotly contested at the turn of the century, an era when white skin color by itself still did not confer automatic white privilege. Racial theorists, politicians, and circus showmen alike ascribed "primitive" qualities to European immigrants from Ireland, southern Europe, and eastern Europe. Matthew Frye Jacobson shows that contemporary magazine descriptions of Italian immigrant communities were strikingly similar to travel writing about Africa and the Levant. He suggests that such imaginings had violent consequences: in 1892 eleven Italian Americans in New Orleans were lynched after being convicted of murdering the local police chief.  

In 1924 a revised Immigrant Act enacted quotas that virtually halted immigration to the United States from southern and eastern Europe and Asia (fig. 32). Three years later, the Kassino Midgets played a rag-tag group of "Immigrants Just Arrived From Ellis Island" at the circus. Costumed as Hasidic Jews with oversized beards and dangling side curls, Italian rustics, and a Romany drag character, these miniature clowns provided a comical exaggeration of unassimilable racial difference.  

Clinging to mules, geese, and plows, native-born farmers were also a common clown subject. In 1993 Adam Forepaugh's burlesque after-show concert featured a "Yankee Farmer" in addition to an "Irish Knock-About,"
a "Black Face Comedian," and "Black Face Sketch Artists." As part of its clown constellation, Barnum & Bailey's program in 1906 included a "Funy Rustic," a "Fat Boy," and an "Odd Zany," among more specific ethnic types including a "German Broad Face" and an "Austrian Looby." The Heebie clown was another turn-of-the-century staple, a visible part of a lively Jewish American entertainment culture that humorously chronicled travails of immigrant life in the United States. Like the symbolic uses of blackface through whiteface, agrarian and Old World characters nostalgically reminded male circus audiences of children's pleasures from an era when later was seemingly more leisurely, tied to the seasons rather than the industrial clock.

The emasculation of the childish rural bumpkin clown was so complete that this character was commonly played in drag: clowns wore enormous fake dresses, wigs, and breasts, in which domestic geese frequently nestled as the clowns played the fiddle or recorder. Tied to other acrobatic and riding traditions, drag has been an important element of circus clowns since its genesis in eighteenth-century Europe. In 1786 the English clown Baptiste Dubois performed the "Metamorphosis of a Sack," in which he changed costumes—and gender—while inside a bag. This stunt later became a standard riding act at the American circus. In the folk tradition of the English comic yokel, Dubois also dressed as a rustic booby, complete with red wig and ruddy face.

In some respects, the clown's gender is indeterminate, obscured by thick pancake white, eye pencil, lipstick, and loud, floppy dress. On one level, the clown's emasculated masquerade rendered him harmless, a friend of children. But on another level, the drag clown explicitly challenged gender norms, because he demonstrated the shifting, socially constructed ground on which "natural" norms were based. Hence, the stereotype of the "scary clown as sexual predator or mental derelict lives on," exemplified by the actor Tim Curry's sociopathic clown character in the film version of Stephen King's It, and punk bands such as the Insane Clown Posse.

The drag clown was most startling at the cooch show, where he often wore tight, plunging gowns, garters, and voluminous inflatable breasts. There he and other drag clowns danced and twisted suggestively, playing gender-bending pranks on dumbfounded men who expected to see nude women. But in some cases, the "men only" cooch show audience did expect to gaze at men in drag. In fact, some gay clowns had sexual encounters with male audience members during and after anonymously crowded scenes. The profession of clowns itself attracted gay men, who found circus life—with its spectrum of human diversity—to be a haven where they could work and live in relative peace.

THE SIDESHOW AND ETHNOLOGICAL CONGRESS

As an interactive performance site, the sideshow and ethnological congress featured varied men who talked to their audiences, stretched and twisted their bodies, danced, and sold postcards of themselves. As in other areas of the circus, their gender performances were shaped by race. The "born" Euroamerican freak, for one, performed as a pillar of domestic virtue. Based on the model of the successful nineteenth-century showman Tom Thumb, midgets were humorously marketed as men of high military rank, like "Major" Burdett, "the world's smallest man." Charles Tripp, a "Legless Wonder" with Barnum & Bailey's sideshow, was advertised as "well educated, intelligent, level-headed, and well informed," "a very sociable man" from a solid family. Bourgeois patriarchy was another common element in the construction of the "born" Euroamerican freak. Born in 1844, Eli Bowen, another "Legless Wonder" with the Barnum & Bailey sideshow, was frequently photographed with his wife Mattie and their four sons. Staged against a parlor setting, Bowen and his well-dressed family appeared financially successful and dignified. Still, the presence of the family could also be sexually evocative. Audiences perhaps found the domestic scenes especially appealing, because they offered "proof" that the freak still had functional genitalia, practiced sexual intercourse, and produced children. Audiences surely imagined the logistics of sexual activity in the case of Eli Bowen, who had flipperlike protuberances instead of legs.

Euroamerican-made freaks and "novelty" acts were often in racial disguise. For instance, in 1896 the Forepaugh & Sells Bros. circus listed W.H. McFarland and Wife as a "Mexican Knife Throwing" act. Dressed in turbans and quasi-"oriental" garb, Euroamerican sword swallowers were variously called Arabs and South Sea Islanders. The tattooed man achieved his masculine primitiveness once his body became colored with injected ink. Whereas tattooed women were marketed as victims of forcible abduction, the tattooed man's "color" was the mark of his travels around the globe, like those of the sailor or soldier. His tattoos were a permanent record of his rites of passage into manhood, a living memento of his physical contact with faraway people. The first tattooed Euroamericans typically were
eighteenth-century seamen who had sailed to South America, Asia, and the Pacific Islands, many of whom reportedly had had sexual relationships with indigenous women.  

Charles Tyng (1801–79), a sea captain based in Boston, received several tattoos from a ship’s mate during his early career in the second decade of the nineteenth century: “I had letters, anchors, hearts, on my hands and arms, and a fancy double heart with C. T. in one, and S. H. [Sally Hickling, an unrequited sweetheart from Boston] in the other. Red roses between, each heart pierced with cupid’s shaft, the red showing the drops of blood dropping from the wound. This was on the left arm.”  

Several tattooed artists, or “Living Picture-Galleries,” claimed to have been tattooed forcibly, or willingly during indigenous marriage rituals, but virtually all intimated that the procedure was sensual. In reality of course, virtually all had been tattooed in the United States in order to enter show business.  

The tattooed man first became widely popular at the American circus in 1876. That year, P. T. Barnum hired Constantine, or Captain Costentenus, in all likelihood an ordinary Italian immigrant who got tattooed as a way to enter show business. But his manager, G. A. Farini (who also managed Krao, "the Missing Link"), told a different, clearly more dramatic story. Supposedly the child of Greek royalty in Albania, Constantine was captured by a Turkish despot and raised in harems both in Turkey and in Egypt, where scores of women fawned over him and occasionally dressed him as a girl. As an adult in the 1860s, Captain Costentenus participated in a French expedition to Cochín China (Vietnam) and Burma, where he was reportedly kidnapped and tattooed on nearly his entire body, including his eyelids and ears. Press agents suggestively noted that the only parts of his body remaining unmarked were his palms and the soles of his feet. The famous nineteenth-century Indologist Max Müller supposedly examined Costentenus, noted that he spoke six languages, and concluded that his opulent tattoos were primarily depictions of the Hindu goddess Durga, wife of Siva. Costentenus heightened his authenticity by wearing a skimpy loincloth (amply illustrating that his tattoos continued beneath the cloth) and his long hair in braids atop his head. The talker tantalized his audience by declaring, “And this wild tattooed man is always much admired by all the ladies.”  

With the publication of Cesare Lombroso’s work Linking Tattooing and Criminality in the 1880s, Constantine—himself a consummate showman—began to market himself as a murderer.  

The tattooed man willfully disfigured his body, which made him seem impervious to pain. While showmen praised the big-top athlete’s manly

ability to hide his pain, the tattooed artist seemed to feel no pain at all—an attribute that the new field of criminal anthropology linked to “dangerous classes” and to “savage” like the Hindu ascetic. Furthermore, tattooing itself was physical evidence that the “Living Picture Gallery” had been intimately touched by another man. Like the act of blackening up, the tattooing process conferred a sort of erotic license upon its European and American practitioners, allowing them to script themselves in sensual terms without official censure. The contemporary social scientist Albert Parry explained the act of watching the tattooed man in recapitulation terminology: “An American circus-goer, gazing at the tattooed man in the sideshow, relives his own past of untold centuries back. Moreover, he can now imitate the freak. He can get a tattooed design or two onto his own skin—and thus blissfully revert to his own distant, primitive type, incidentally experiencing a certain erotic pleasure in the process of being tattooed.”  

Other forms of willful bodily mutilation further transfigured the male body. Tiny Kline remembered watching men carefully prepare their bodies to become marketable “rubber-men” and “human ostrich” glass-eaters. Kline knew several “human ostriches” and recalled how they ate drinking glasses and light bulbs, cutting their mouths with great frequency. Usually, the glass-eater would chew bits of glass, spit them into a glass of water, and then drink the prickly mixture. One “human ostrich” died in the middle of another act at an outdoor performance. Kline notes that his autopsy revealed the severe internal damage done by his glass-eating career: “And so it came to light: the tumorous growth attached to his stomach when dissected, revealed bits of glass, nuts and bolts and other small hardware imbedded in that semblance of a gizzard; as if mother nature, when seeing this human trying to imitate the fowl, went right along with him in his unhealthy pursuit, aiding him.”  

By publicly eating harmful substances for profit, the glass-eater methodically subverted the limits of the body itself by gradually committing, in Kline’s words, “practically retarded suicide.”  

The ingester’s practice of internal bodily disfigurement linked him to the traditions of ritual bodily disfigurement found in preindustrial societies. His demonstrations of bodily punishment tapped into popular depictions of South Asian sadhus (celibate religious ascetics) reclining on beds of nails with withered, perpetually upright arms, which Americans saw in missionary tracts or in the pages of National Geographic. The anthropologist Kirin Narayan demonstrates that the sadhu’s bodily disfigurement—on the bed of nails in particular—has been commodified and emptied of its original meaning in American advertising and language. In our time, this connection
between bodily mutilation, racial transmogrification, and desire has continued with ‘Mr. Lifto,’ a former member of the Jim Rose circus sideshow, whose act is inspired by South Asian ascetic practices. Mr. Lifto infuses ascetic South Asian dress and religious imagery into his act as he lifts iron and bricks with his long, flaccid, pierced penis.666

As part of a culture that embraced racial hierarchy, the range of characters that “genuine” men of color were hired to play at the turn-of-the-century sideshow was limited to the “wild man,” royal “savage,” “missing link,” and childlike “primitive.” Black players in particular were often staged as actual apes, “undeveloped” men, or exemplars of masculine “savagery.” William Henry Johnson, an African American from Bound Brook, New Jersey, staged many variations on the “primitive” stereotype throughout his sixty-six-year career as a freak. Billed at different times in his career as a “wild boy,” a “missing link,” a “Siamese tree-dweller,” a Martian, an Aztec, a “nondescript,” and most famously as “Zip… What Is It?” Johnson always remained mute on stage, from his early days with P. T. Barnum at the American Museum in 1860 until his final years at Coney Island, where he silently worked until his death in 1926 at eighty-four.666 Accounts of Johnson’s early life are sketchy: perhaps he was sold to a sideshow at the age of four by his destitute parents; other reports state that in 1856 P. T. Barnum rescued him from slavery.677 Clad in fur, a grass skirt, and posed next to a spear, he also strummed the ukulele during the sideshow “blow off” in later years. He shaved his head, except for a small tuft of hair, a few inches above his occipital bone, that was teased into a stiff triangle to exaggerate his head’s sharp point and small size. Johnson’s domineering manager described “Zip” to the press as a perpetual juvenile, racially “limited” from reaching full manhood. “In private life [Zip] is a noisy and irrepressible child. . . . In the sideshow tent when the crowds are barred, Zip casts aside his reserve and frolics with [Princess] Woe Woe, the midget. He plays with his choicest possessions—a broken watch, and frequently becomes mightily upset when he thinks his dignity has been hurt.”688

Johnson’s long career of utter silence, coupled with his odd head shape, has given many people cause to assume that he was mentally retarded and afflicted with microcephaly.699 However, those who knew him in private remembered him differently. Tiny Kline worked with Johnson about the time of World War I and recalled that he was a “normal colored man.” Although Johnson’s contract stipulated that he remain silent on stage, he mixed freely with circus workers behind the scenes. Kline remarked: “Should any folks have dropped into the side-show during the ‘off’ hours, between five and seven P.M., however, they would have found [Johnson] down on his knees in the circle with the other men, before a blanket spread out on the ground, shooting ‘crap,’ and with typical Southern accent, repeating the magic words used in the game: ‘Come on, seven! ‘Come, ‘leven!’ or ‘Baby needs new shoes!’ ‘Bet I’ll make it!’ ‘Here I come!’”700

It was a tribute to Johnson’s skills that his act effectively eclipsed any notions of normality witnessed by his coworkers behind the scenes. As a mute “savage,” Johnson had a public persona that complemented contemporary ideologies concerning race and manhood. Recapitulation theorists would argue that Johnson’s race kept him “fixed” in an earlier stage of development—similar to the “noisy and irrepressible child” that he was supposed to be. Unlike the Euroamerican freak, Johnson, a bachelor, was never staged in a fancy parlor setting with a wife and children—even though he earned a good income as “Zip.” In line with scientific constructions of racial difference, Johnson’s race kept manliness, and all its associations with whiteness and the respectable family, out of his “developmental” grasp. But among the closely knit, interracial traveling town of circus workers, Johnson was an ordinary man who participated freely in circus community life.

At the ethnological congress, the absence of northern Europeans and the native-born implicitly placed them at the top of the racial hierarchy of human beings and animals. In 1894 Barnum & Bailey announced that “The Australian Bushmen. The Lowest in the Human Scale of All the Peoples of the Earth are also to be Seen in the Congress.”711 Indeed, this racial-animal juxtaposition took its most dramatic and cruellest popular form in 1906 at the Bronx Zoo, where Ota Benga, a Batwa pygmy, lived against his will in the Monkey House with a parrot and an orangutan. African Americans successfully petitioned for his transfer to a Colored Orphan Asylum, but Benga committed suicide ten years later.712

William T. Hornaday, the director of the Bronx Zoo who arranged and managed Ota Benga’s captivity, turned to the animal world to explain racial difference. He proclaimed that the most “primitive” people on earth were the “canoe Indians” of Tierra del Fuego, “the lowest rung of the human ladder.” Hornaday stated: “Their only clothing consists of skins of the guanaco loosely hung from the neck, and flapping over the naked and repulsive body. They make no houses, and on shore their only shelters from the wind and snow and chilling rains are rabbit-like forms of brush, broken off by hand.”713 Hornaday concluded that orioles, caciques, and weaver birds were more intelligent than the “canoe Indians” of Greenland, or the “Foonans” of Central Borneo, because the birds at least demonstrated elaborate nests.

[King of Beasts to Clowns in Drag]
making (i.e. home making) skills. By projecting middle-class ideals about privacy and property ownership onto a taxonomy of humans and animals, Hornaday justified the racial politics of the day.

The evolutionary notion of “vanishing races” was another facet of masculine racial representation at the circus and Wild West. G. Stanley Hall proclaimed: “Never, perhaps, were lower races being extirpated as weeds in the human garden, both by conscious and organic processes, so rapidly as to-day.” Showmen claimed that people of color were vanishing alongside the landscape to which their racial identity was ostensibly tied. Press agents characterized Native Americans as “fine specimens of a race of people doomed... to... extinction, like the buffalo they once hunted.” Step by step with the departing buffaloes he has kept an always backward race. There seems to be no power on earth to save the departing Red Man. His doom seems to be fixed, his day on earth is apparently short.” Advertisements exhorted audiences to see the Wild West show soon to catch a last, live glimpse of the nearly “extinct” American Indian. Impresarios marketed the ethnological congress as a conservation project of sorts, where modern Euroamericans could still witness the unrestrained masculinity of the “natural” man in a world fast becoming culturally homogenized by the industrial revolution and western imperialism. Yet the eventual face-to-face meetings often shook up audiences' nostalgic expectations of the other as a static relic. One newspaper reported that two boys were shocked to hear Wild West Indians speak in perfectly clear English. “The boys gasped in astonishment and looked ready to cry to think that a ‘red devil’ should talk in that modern way.”

Native Americans were hired at the Wild West and circus to dramatize hegemonic, sweeping declension narratives about vanishing people, animals, and habitat. But paradoxically, such employment also gave them an opportunity to cement cultural ties among themselves—in direct contradiction to the normative tropes of decline that they were hired to play. Native American players often met with fellow Indians in the audience after the performance. At Ashland, Wisconsin, in 1896, the Wild West was an occasion for peacemaking between some historical enemies, the Lakota Indians and the 500 Ojibwa attending the production. Cody and the federal agent in charge of the Ojibwa helped arrange a meeting at which the Indians held a powwow and smoked the peace pipe. The route book observed, “This is the first time in nearly forty years that these two old enemies have met on friendly terms... The meeting was all that could be desired, and the ‘hatchet’ is forever buried between these two tribes, who have been enemies for so many years.” L. G. Moses argues that Native American performers often found the circus and Wild West show to be places in which to affirm cultural traditions, much to the dismay of assimilation-minded reformers who saw these seemingly unassimilated Indians “playing themselves” as a threat: reformers thought that Cody’s traveling outfit celebrated traditional cultural forms and, worst of all, encouraged Plains Indians (in particular) to remain nomadic.

At the ethnological congress, showmen portrayed men of color living idly in “sun-kissed” lands, while their female counterparts labored. Just as impresarios depicted female labor as evidence of racial primitiveness, the supposed “ease” of these performers stood in distinct contrast to an industrious Victorian manly ideal. Barnum & Bailey’s ethnological congress in 1894 promised audiences “an entire family of intelligent Javanese, the women busily occupied in deftly weaving varicolored straws into beautiful mats, while the men sat in front of their huts smoking, and the children are at play” (emphasis mine). Regarding Barnum & Bailey’s “delegates from the East,” one article in the same year observed that “The Women Wear Bloomers and the Men Petticoats: With Rings in their Noses and Diamonds in their Feet.” Another announced that the “Wild Men of New Guinea... although Unaccustomed to Clothes... are Fond of Ornaments.” Thus displays of male “laziness” produced spectacles in drag, where women did “men’s work” and men sat ornamented, idle. Still, exhibits of nonlabor could also undermine showmen’s goals of edifying their audiences. Bluford Adams argues that ethnological congresses “offered a glimpse of a world where labor was not alienated,” thus providing working-class audiences with a less regimented alternative to modern industrial life.

Press releases, programs, and newspaper articles were obsessed with the scantily clad, nonwhite male body as a model of sensual, premodern masculinity, as the following headlines from 1894 suggest: “South Pacific Savagery: The Men Are Models of Robust Vigor” (New York Sun), “[T]he Muscles of the Men Are as Hard as Those of Trained Athletes; And Their Countenances Scarred... in Battle Denote the Presence of a Brute Courage Such as Only They Possess” (New York Advertiser). Press releases beckoned Euroamerican audiences with descriptions of a “Symphony in Coffee... A Coffee-Colored Congress”; or, “Black and brown skinned, copper colored, white, olive. Every shade, color and kind of savage people from mountain, valley, forest, jungle or cave.” The “coffee-colored congress” was filled with nearly nude men, rustling in skimpy grass skirts and...
leather loincloths, wearing brightly colored war paint and tattoos, while Euroamerican families looked on. Proprietors further teased their audiences with liberal mention of polygamous practices, providing a direct contrast to their promotions of Euroamerican players as monogamous patriarchs. But these marketing strategies could have concrete consequences. At an ethnological production in London in 1899, "Savage South Africa," the local media complained that British women and the barely clad South African performers (who later worked at the Louisiana Purchase Exposition in St. Louis in 1904) had become too friendly with each other, observing that "grown women not only shake hands with them but stroke their limbs admiringly. . . . These raw, hulking and untamed men-animals are being unwillingly and utterly corrupted by unseemly attention from English girls." Although power relations were seemingly framed and codified by the distinction between performer and audience, the jammed environs of the circus and Wild West provided opportunities for interclass contact among audiences and show workers in an era when such encounters were forbidden.

As part of their efforts to heighten the differences between the pre-industrial and the modern, press agents freely documented the initial reactions to urban society of male Native American members of the ethnological congress. Their stories always juxtaposed the physicality of the Native American man—complete with waist-length hair and great height—with the dense, "effete" urban landscape of the eastern United States. Nostalgia animated such imaginings. William F. Cody mournfully observed that settlement had created creaky, settled men and posited that masculine renewal came with expansion into the wilderness. "[P]ioneers fought their way westward into desert and jungle. . . . From the mouth of the Hudson River to the shores of the Pacific, men and women and children have conquered the wilderness by going to the frontier and staying there—not by crowding into cities and living as do worms, by crawling through each other and devouring the leavings." The Wild West, though, reportedly helped stifle the effeminizing influence of modern civilization: a courier in 1907 announced that Buffalo Bill's Wild West would "stimulate not only the manliest, but the most heroic qualities of both mind and body. . . .[O]ut and through and through and through the manliest exhibition of our day . . . without exception, the hundreds of representatives from the various enlightened, civilized, semi-barbarous and savage nations included in its anthropological, military equestrian and tribal divisions are nature's noblemen in physique, fearless audacity, consummate skill. . . . Both as individuals and as a whole, wherever they appear they command respect and admiration, and their manly leader can truthfully say of everyone of them: 'This is a man.'" (emphasis in original).

Male audience members often read these exhibitions of male athleticism on America's continental and overseas frontiers as liberating—just as many found the itinerant culture of the circus itself so unfettered and attractive that they "ran away" with it. Mark Twain praised the Wild West show in a letter to William F. Cody, stating that he saw the show twice and "enjoyed it thoroughly," and that "it brought vividly back the breezy, wild life of the great plains and the Rocky Mountains, and stirred me like a war song." After attending "Pawnee Bill's" Wild West in Montclair, New Jersey, Army Captain C. W. Briggs expressed melancholic desire for the vanishing "wild" West in a letter to *Billboard* in 1900 (in which, tellingly, Briggs notes that he must take a train—the most pervasive symbol of the new age—to reach the "frontier"): "Nearly half of my life has been spent on the great western frontier, and it is no exaggeration to say that the panorama, as enacted, carried me back to the old days and filled my heart with a feeling of homesickness for the wide and boundless plains, which, even as I write of it now, comes back to me in a manner so strong that I feel like smashing the oak desk at which I sit writing, packing my camp outfit and taking the first train for God's open wilderness, where fresh air and cool spring water at least are free, and the four walls of brick and mortar, the city man's world, can no longer encompass me."
stant fascination for spectators. Proprietors further fetishized the bodies of
African American roustabouts by using them in specs set in Asia or Africa.
Black workingmen strode around the big top dressed in robes and head-
pieces. During the course of the spec, these men went to a separate tent
several times, where they gradually took off pieces of their costuming until
at the end of the spec, their bodies were nearly bare.296

Workingmen's labor was also exciting to watch because it was just as
dangerous as the athletic stunts under the big top. Roustabouts were fre-
quently injured and sometimes killed by heavy equipment. During their
public "performance" of efficiently setting up and tearing down the circus,
workingmen were occasionally crushed by a loose wagon, a tent pole, or a
train car rolling away. Route books were peppered with such entries. On
July 31, 1894, in Willimantic, Connecticut, "while sleeping on a flat car,
[Dennis Kearns, a razor back,] falls off and rolls beneath the wheels of the
fastly moving trains and has both legs severed from his body ... after a short
struggle he died, speaking of his dear mother."297 On July 16, 1892, at Beaver
Dam, Wisconsin, "In unloading Frank Tuttle, a trainman, was run over by
the big tiger den. One wheel passed over his jaw and another over his breast,
crushing him terribly. Blood ran from his mouth, ears and nose, and formed
in a pool around him. 'Good-by, boys, I am dying,' he said. That night he
passed over the dark river which all must cross in time. His brother sum-
momned from Oshkosh by a telegram, took the body home."298 On July 14,
1898, "Slivers' Holland, assistant boss canvasman, [was] severely burned
by a flame from a beacon, which was upset by the rear wheel of pole wagon
and then exploded."299

Roustabouts often derailed the disciplined production of labor in which
they played such a critical part. They swore, fought, and occasionally killed
one another. One newspaper reporter was especially surprised when he
heard no "blue" language spoken among the workingmen. Route books also
noted that roustabouts were occasionally arrested for verbal profanity.300
Because these anonymous men were generally transient and their working
conditions were rough, they had little personal stake in the traveling com-
community which bound other circus workers so tightly together; as a result,
they were more prone to violence. For example, in Dubuque, Iowa, a canvas-
man, Lewis Hart, was hit over the head with a stake by W. Johnson after an
argument. Hart was taken to Mercy Hospital, where he died. Johnson was
arrested and charged with first-degree murder.301

But audience members were more dangerous. Despite the presence of
local police or Pinkerton agents on the large railroad outfits, crowds of men
gathered on Circus Day to posture, throw stones, and pull punches. Dur-
ing Barnum & Bailey's annual spring parade in New York City in 1892,
local hoodlums suddenly pelted players with snowballs and rocks. A woman
riding atop the Mother Goose wagon was struck in the mouth with a snow-
ball laden with heavy chunks of coal. Her mouth bled and she lost several
teeth. Angry Native American workers dove into the crowd and brawled
with the young punks. "Pistols Fired and Women Scream for Help," pro-
claimed one headline.302

In general, the evening show and its aftermath were the time for men
to fight—after women and children had gone home. In darkness, town
toughs confronted circus workers and fellow spectators alike. At Bowling
Green, Kentucky, one circus employee, J. H. Lewis prevented a "shooting
affray between town guys" and secured "one of their revolvers as a memento."
303 During a rough night in Anamosa, Iowa: "After show, Anamosa and
Rock City toughs, full of fighting whiskey, had a grand battle royal. One
Irishman got his face pounded off, but denied that he hollered 'enough.'"304
In some isolated rural areas, the annual arrival of a circus became a predicta-
ble, ritual stage for violence, an opportunity to "settle scores" or vindicate
one's manly honor in a public setting. Circus workers looked at Kentucky's
hill country as a predictable venue for such confrontations. Emmett Kelly
recalled: "[By] nightfall, I could see hundreds of lanterns lights bobbing
on the mountain paths, and before the show our tent was jammed to ca-
pacity. This was rough country with plenty of moonshine and the fighting
that goes with it. An odd thing, though, was that the toughs who got loaded
and picked fights never bothered the circus people, but always fought each
other."305 The Ringling Bros.' route book in 1899 chronicled the following
incident: "Monday, September 10th. Williamsport, Ky. The show has the
effect of bringing them in from the hills. All have an opportunity to see
high life among the natives. The little town is in holiday attire, and to fit-
tingly commemorate the happiness of the day, and incidentally to vindicate
some very urgent cases of personal honor, sah, that have been neglected
for some time, a bit of cutting and shooting is done. Only two were killed.
The wounded have not yet been counted."306

These public spectacles of violence complicated the relationship between
performer and spectator because the roles were often reversed, as circus
workers—normally construed as primitive Others in the eyes of the audi-
ence—judged the audience to be unruly and dangerous. Covering a spec-
trum of planned and spontaneous acts, the circus shakes up the idea that
the "gaze" is unidirectional and hegemonic. At the circus, male workers and
audiences both played active subjects and objects of the male gaze—therefore complicating studies that analyze the gaze exclusively as an expression of male power over women. At the circus, no one possessed exclusive ownership of the gaze because it was a site of multiple surveillance, a thrilling “theater in the round” which enabled people to watch each other from various vantages.

The circus was a ritualized gathering site for men across the United States, for “strangers” pouring in from miles around. In this setting of a world-town seemingly turned upside down, men freely engaged in bad behavior. But outbursts of male violence were not simply random. Rather, the commotion addressed many aspects of the social order. Although Euro-American men engaged most commonly in recreational fighting with each other, they also created scenarios of displaced abjection because they attempted to raise their own precarious social status by picking fights with men of color. In addition, fights could express familial or class-based divisions within a community. Eruptions could also articulate the frustrations of bored, alienated men who led increasingly regimented lives. Circus Day, after all, represented a day away from work, and provided consumers with live images of the world beyond their borders.

At the turn of the century, normative circus images of male gender were part of a burgeoning consumer culture targeted at young boys. Dime novels, such as “Tom Throttle, The Boy Engineer of the Midnight Express,” placed vigorous Euro-American boys squarely in the thick of dangerous, wholesome athletic adventures, often in foreign locales. But as this chapter has argued, the circus’s promise of an exciting world beyond provincial boundaries offered its consumers something even more startling. Alongside its manly white big-top athletes and animal trainers, the circus contained androgynous acrobats, drag clowns, “wild” animals, and animalized men—all of whom provided flexible exhibitions of male gender identity which challenged contemporary gender norms but still reflected the racialist standards of the day.

As national popular-culture forms, the circus and Wild West had a lack of local ties that compelled showmen to promote their spectacular gender performances on the national and international stage. The ubiquitous figure of the powerful Euro-American male circus athlete in boy’s fiction and show programs also resonated with theorists who linked physical fitness with nationalism. G. Stanley Hall exhorted his fellow educators to include physical exercise in their curricula because there were “many new reasons to believe that the best nations of the future will be those which give most intelligent care to the body.” At the turn of the century, many Americans were already confident that their country, having thoroughly trounced Spain in 1898, was fast becoming one of “the best nations.” In this context, the circus’s vigorous celebration of the “strenuous life” had national, indeed global, ramifications at the dawning of the “American Century.”