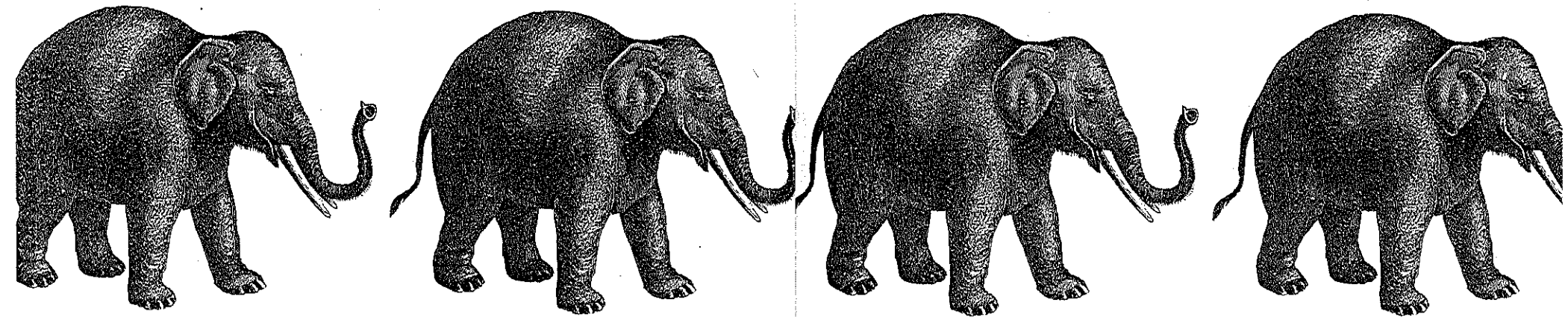
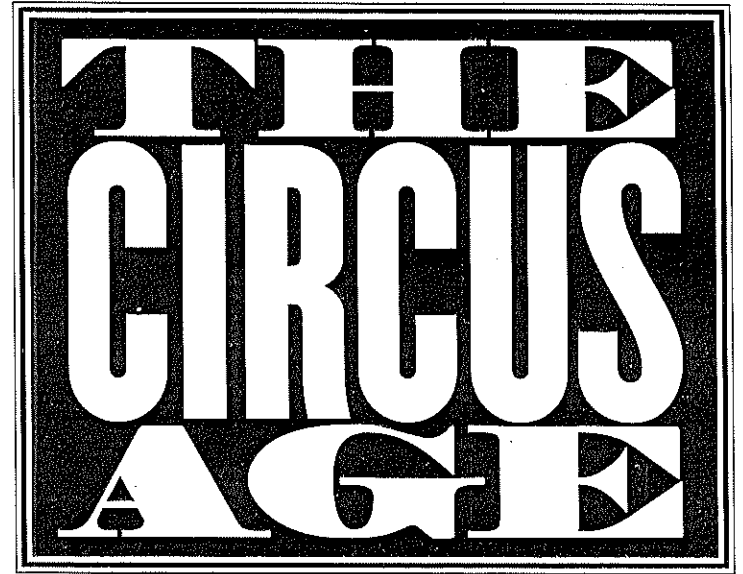



CULTURE
& SOCIETY
UNDER THE
AMERICAN
BIG TOP

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THE UNIVERSITY OF
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CHAPEL HILL & LONDON





4 RESPECTABLE FEMALE NUDITY

In 1896 the New Woman came to the circus. That year, Barnum & Bailey's program contained "Three Graceful, Original and Interesting Equestrian Novelties," which playfully suggested that the "New Woman" might create a new social order dominated by women: "The New Woman supreme in the arena for the first time anywhere. Novel and picturesque exhibition of the assertion of the rights of the twentieth-century girl . . . in the circus. A positive usurpation of the ring in which man has no part. Progressive maidens fascinatingly conducting an entire equestrian act in up to date costumes."¹ During this act and other "New Woman numbers," women, clad in "becoming" bloomers, "of the most trim fitting, advanced new woman dress reform pattern," played all roles in the arena: ringmaster, groom, and object holder. Press releases announced that "no man is allowed to occupy that sacred ground of territory."²

In the collapsible canvas world of the circus, these "New Women" seemingly erased corporeal boundaries between the sexes. Women performers proudly displayed rippling bodies while demonstrating impressive feats of strength and handling dangerous animals. In 1911 Barnum & Bailey provided detailed muscle measurements of a German weightlifter, Katie Sandwina, and declared: "She Tosses Husband about like Biscuit. Frau Sandwina is Giantess in Strength."³ At the circus, some women wore full, flowing beards. The lady giantess towered over the curious crowds at the sideshow.

African, Asian, Latin American, and Australian women at the "ethnological congress" easily defeated men in athletic contests. Moreover, the circus was a comfortable space for women who felt alienated by social norms. Mabel Stark, a tough big-cat trainer whose body was, in the words of one colleague, "a network of scars" from frequent cat bites, knew as a teenager that she did not share her female classmates' predilections for dating and socializing.⁴ After seeing a circus as a child in Princeton, Kentucky, Stark knew that she would eventually join a traveling show. Thereafter, she spent her spare time at the zoo watching the animals; while working as a nurse as a young adult, Stark "ran away" to California, met the showman Al Sands, and in 1913 joined the Al G. Barnes circus.⁵ In an era when a majority of women's roles were still circumscribed by Victorian ideals of domesticity and feminine propriety, circus women's performances celebrated female power, thereby representing a startling alternative to contemporary social norms.

These "New Women" were also nearly nude (fig. 10). Thousands of lithographs saturated the site of each future show, portraying barely dressed women in a range of bodily attitudes: on the trapeze, with snakes, lions, horses, or clowns, or en masse as members of a giant chorus. In performance, lithe, scantily clad acrobats and bareback riders freely twisted and contorted their bodies. Wearing a short skirt and nearly sleeveless top, the "Lady Hercules" lifted prodigious weights (plate 2). Spangled female animal trainers wrestled "man-eating" tigers, while spray-painted, virtually naked women posed topless, nearly bottomless, and motionless as nymphs, Venuses, or maidens in the "Act Beautiful" or statue act, a turn-of-the-century variant on the antebellum tableaux vivants, or living pictures genre.

But showmen were keenly aware of circus women's transgressive potential. As a result, they repositioned these strong, athletic, traveling women into traditional gender categories: as models of domestic womanliness, and as objects of titillation. In their elaborate advertising campaigns, proprietors used gender, race, class, and representations of empire to create an irresistible sexual striptease under the guise of "clean" family entertainment. Arguing that there is no such thing as generic nudity, this chapter examines how nudity in some contexts was "respectable" and in other contexts salacious—the distinction was often created by racial stereotypes. Nudity itself is a historical construction and will be considered here in the context of dress standards at the turn of the century. Because American women generally wore full skirts and long-sleeved shirtwaists at this time, virtually

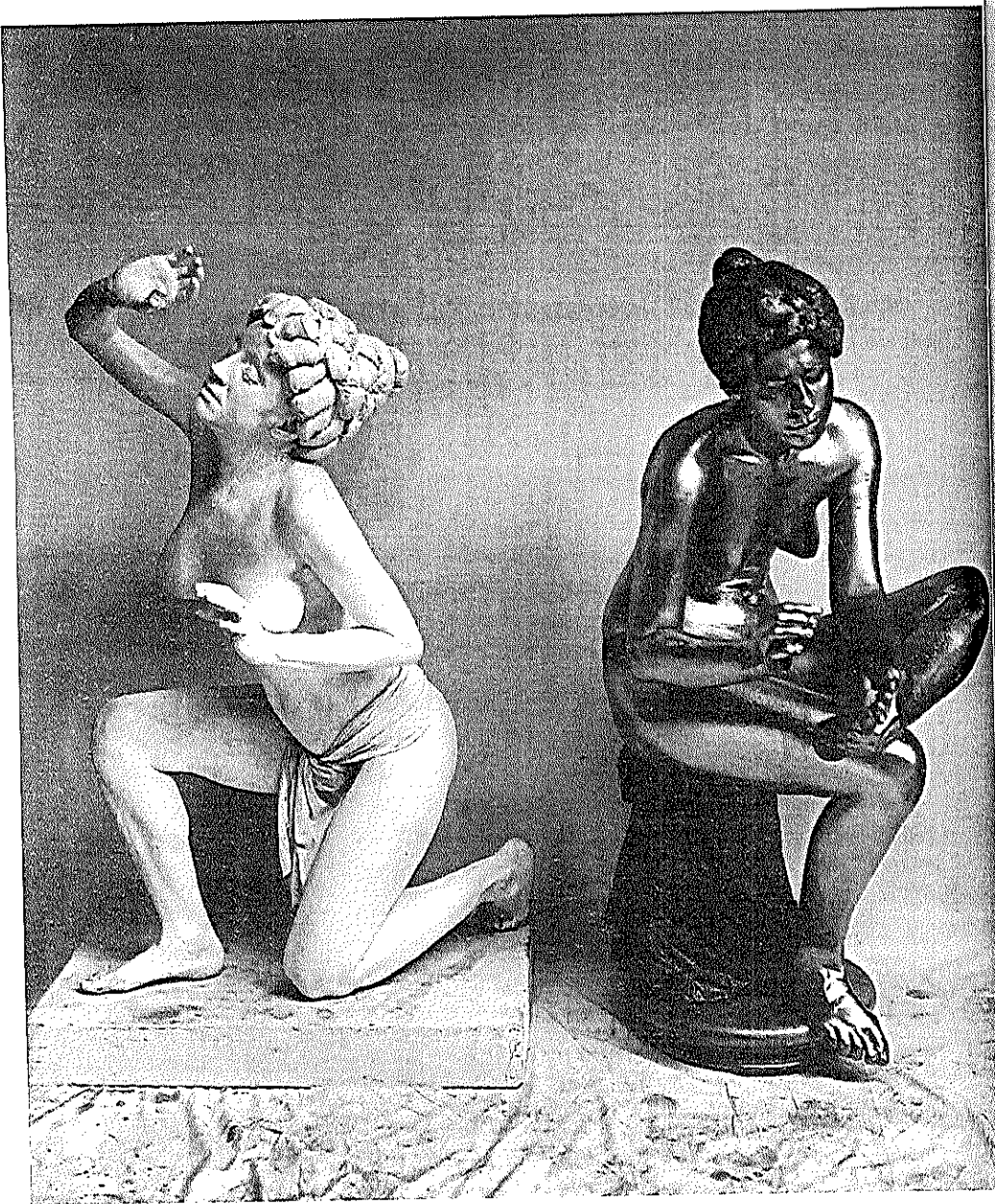


Figure 10. "Statue Girls," Barnum & Bailey, Brockton, Mass., 1903. Wearing messy white or bronze greasepaint, these virtually nude women posed motionless as they imitated high art. (Frederick Glasier Collection, neg. no. 639; black-and-white photograph, copy from glass plate negative, 10 × 8 in., museum purchase, Collection of the John and Mable Museum of Art Archives, Sarasota, Fla.)

anything short of that coverage could be construed as "nude," including the wearing of leotards, tights, or short-sleeved dresses above the knee.

Proprietors presented white women as quintessential models of civilized, athletic womanliness, while they exhibited women of color (or Euroamerican women in racial disguise) as live, educational artifacts, whose nudity was an integral part of their racial "authenticity." Although this chapter focuses on the representational strategies of circuses owned by Euroamericans, one should not assume that only white circus folk were concerned about respectability during the Progressive Era. People of color in the amusement industry were equally attuned to the tensions between propriety and sexual display. For example, a poster for the African American blues singer Ma Rainey and the "Smart Set" promised "The Greatest Colored Show on Earth . . . The Biggest Bevy of Singing and Dancing Girls You Have Ever Seen . . . Everything Clean, Moral and Refined."⁶ In all cases, however, these claims of propriety were made with a wink. Showmen's constant emphasis on female performers' lives, loves, and body-hugging tights became yet another way to talk about sex.⁷

THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Impresarios' focus on circus women's propriety at the turn of the century was particularly striking because they had downplayed the presence of female players just fifty years earlier. In antebellum America, reformers' responses to female circus players—indeed, to the circus as a whole—was unfavorable. In Chillicothe, Ohio, and Rochester, New York, as well as other communities, the Presbyterian and Methodist clergy condemned the circus's celebration of the body, its connection to the theater, and its omnipresent shell games. Dating back to the colonial period, antitheater laws were often rooted in Enlightenment thought. William Penn, among other colonial figures, argued that the cosmos was fixed and that external appearances revealed eternal truths. According to the media scholar Robert Allen, the theater's emphasis on mimicry, spectacle, and inversions of gender and class sharply confounded the rationalistic idea that the world was what it seemed.⁸

Critics also charged that neither circus workers nor the class of people whom the circus attracted engaged in productive labor. The editor of a religious periodical in Lexington, Kentucky, lambasted Joshua Purdy Brown's circus in 1831 because it encouraged "idleness, intemperate drinking, profanity, a taste for low company [and] boisterous vulgarity."⁹ Connecticut,

home to P. T. Barnum, outlawed the circus altogether until 1840. The state legislature forbade any unusual feats of the body for monetary gain. Circuses continued to travel to Connecticut, but they could not advertise in newspapers for fear of arrest.¹⁰ During the Second Great Awakening in Rochester, New York, town clergymen in this part of the "Burned-Over District" led the movement to close a permanent circus building and turned it into a soap factory.¹¹ From 1824 until the early twentieth century, the Vermont legislature virtually taxed the circus out of the state instead of banning it outright.¹² P. T. Barnum himself explained why the antebellum circus deserved to be censured:

In those days the circus was very justly the object of the Church's animadversions. [I]n afterpiece, "The Tailor of Tamworth" or "Pete Jenkins," . . . drunken characters were represented and broad jokes, suited to the groundlings, were given. Its fun consisted of the clown's vulgar jests, emphasized with still more vulgar and suggestive gestures, lest providentially the point might be lost. Educational features the circus of that day had none. Its employees were mostly of the rowdy element, and it had a following of card-sharpers, pickpockets and swindler generally, who were countenanced by some of the circus proprietors, with whom they shared their ill-gotten gains. Its advent was dreaded by all law abiding people, who knew that with it would inevitably cause disorder, drunkenness and riot.¹³

Antebellum circus audience members targeted circus women as disreputable. Most objections centered on costuming. Although tights and leotards were not worn until after the Civil War, antebellum players wore stockings under knee-length skirts—a far cry from the proper, heavily corseted, long-sleeved, floor-length dress of the period.¹⁴ One woman recalled that as a child in 1857, her grandmother forbade her to go to a circus: "[Grandmother] said it was all right to look at the creatures God had made, but she did not think He ever intended that women should go only half dressed and stand up and ride on horses bare back, or jump through hoops in the air."¹⁵ Purity reformers and audiences both frequently thought that all female entertainers were prostitutes because they exposed their bodies for pay. Even women audience members were often treated with suspicion. During the first half of the nineteenth century, American theater managers commonly reserved the third tier of seats, or upper gallery, for prostitutes and their customers as a site of sexual exchange.¹⁶

Because they were often banned by law for their bodily spectacles, cir-

cuses deemphasized their women players; some even excluded women altogether. In 1840 an advertisement for the Raymond, Waring and Company circus guaranteed that its production in Philadelphia would contain no women: "[T]he introduction of Females into an Equestrian Establishment is not calculated to advance [the Chestnut Street Amphitheatre's] interests, while they not unfrequently mar the harmony of the entertainments, and bring the whole exhibition into disrepute. It never was ordained by Nature that woman should degrade the representatives of her sex which are not calculated for any other than the stalwart male."¹⁷

The circus was hardly the only nineteenth-century entertainment to censure the display of seminude women. Robert Allen has written that burlesque was a battleground where nineteenth-century Americans fought over shifting attitudes about gender and class. When the English actress Lydia Thompson and her burlesque troupe of "British Blondes" arrived in New York City in 1868, thousands of New Yorkers thronged to Wood's Theater in lower Manhattan, where the thinly clad actresses performed male roles and verbally poked fun at social norms. Local authorities tolerated the troupe only at this working-class venue; when the popular "British Blondes" moved to a reputable theater, Niblo's Garden, the press, local government officials, and reformers condemned the troupe. Unlike contemporary ballet, in which seminude women played silent, otherworldly nymphs and fairies, or melodrama, in which actresses typically played pious, sexless roles, in burlesque the performer talked and leered openly at her audience. Consequently, theaters catering to decent male and female audiences banned burlesque, which rapidly moved to the male world of the concert hall and increasingly was characterized by acts of mute bodily exhibition.¹⁸

In distinct contrast to burlesque's downward historical trajectory, the circus became more reputable over time. Circus proprietors increasingly used women to sell their productions as decent. Posters portrayed well-attired white women and families as part of the turn-of-the-century audience.¹⁹ Impresarios adopted this sales strategy, in part because they knew that their patrons had changed. In antebellum America, men constituted the great majority of the circus audience. The virtual absence of women at the circus mirrored larger limitations on women's presence in public life. The prevailing ideology of separate spheres—whereby women's sanctioned role was in the home while men engaged in paid labor in the public world—helps explain why few women frequented antebellum circuses and why circus women were commonly censured. Although poor women participated in the paid labor market throughout their lives, bourgeois women became increas-

ingly privatized, owing largely to changes in the American economy. Before the nineteenth century, the American labor market was characterized by a patriarchal system of household and shop production in which male family members worked as artisans or farmers; the home and the workplace were the same. By the mid-nineteenth century, paid work occurred away from the home because the market economy and its attendant systems of factory and wage labor had generally proletarianized the artisan and small farmer. As a result, the distinctions between public and private life became more sharply drawn.²⁰ Many women were publicly active in church-based voluntary associations connected to abolitionism, temperance, marital property reform, and women's suffrage, but their activism was predicated upon their maternal authority. Novels and new women's magazines like *Godey's Lady's Book* (1836–98) stressed the primacy of women's domestic role as the moral guardian of the home.

By the beginning of the twentieth century, Victorian distinctions between public and private spheres were crumbling. As part of this sea change, a growing number of families attended the circus, and female acts became increasingly visible and socially acceptable.²¹ Circus women's heightened presence occurred just as more women were participating in paid labor and public activism. At mid-century, the majority of female paid laborers had worked in the private, familial setting of domestic service; its decline in the second half of the nineteenth century paralleled the ascendancy of factory production.²² Concurrently, with the growth of corporations and service industries during the Gilded Age, young and single native-born women worked as office clerks (especially after the advent of the typewriter in 1873) and in retail sales at sprawling new department stores. Although many young women gave their parents a share of their earnings, they also had some disposable income and congregated at a variety of public amusements. Kathy Peiss argues that the rise of urban factory labor with distinct hours helped create a heterosocial leisure culture in which young, unmarried working-class men and women shared their nonworking hours together.²³ But the specter of young women "loose" in the streets was unsettling to some. Jane Addams, a founder of Hull House, noted, "Never before in civilization have such numbers of young girls been suddenly released from the protection of the home and permitted to walk unattended upon city streets and to work under alien roofs."²⁴ From 1889 onward, new settlement houses and clubs served as spaces where young working women could engage in "uplifting" cultural activities that would distract them from the "tantalizing" world of popular amusements out in the streets.

Women also became increasingly visible in public life by participating in a raft of Progressive reform movements. Women activists across the country worked to ameliorate poverty, social unrest, and racism through diverse organizations such as the Woman's Christian Temperance Union (1874) and the National Association of Colored Women (1896). Like members of antebellum voluntary associations, women reformers during the late nineteenth century argued that their domestic and maternal "nature" gave them special authority to push for social reform outside electoral channels, because women did not yet have the vote. But unlike the antebellum reformers, who effected social change through private institutions and "moral suasion," Progressive women embraced the public sphere by turning to the state. Before the Nineteenth Amendment for women's suffrage was finally ratified in 1920, women suffragists held street parades, open-air meetings, and pickets outside the White House, using tactics they had learned in part from the flamboyant English suffragists Emmaline and Christabel Pankhurst.²⁵

The suffragists' colorful tactics mirrored the spectacular display of the female body at the circus. Josie DeMott Robinson, a bareback rider, played an active role in the suffrage movement; at rallies, she posed atop her rearing horse for publicity photographs.²⁶ Circus day, with huge crowds, was a highly visible occasion on which to promote the vote. On the Fourth of July in 1912, members of the Wisconsin Woman's Suffrage Association drove an automobile to the Ringling Bros. circus grounds in Racine, where they were well received by circus employees. The suffragists spent their day distributing literature to the circus crowd.²⁷

Women's public activism occurred alongside growing popular references to sexuality. In 1913 the magazine *Current Opinion* proclaimed that it was "Sex O'Clock in America!"²⁸ At dance halls across the nation, young, unmarried women and men danced closely, doing the turkey trot and the slow shimmy with abandon. Built in 1897, Coney Island's Steeplechase amusement park offered young couples plenty of opportunities to kiss and hug in the dark, meandering "Tunnel of Love."²⁹ The vaudeville actresses Eva Tanguay and Gertrude Hoffmann portrayed themselves as worldly "personalities."³⁰ In his first visit to the United States in 1909, Sigmund Freud postulated that sexuality was the defining aspect of the human experience, from infancy to old age. After 1910 a group of young intellectuals known as the Greenwich Village sex radicals denounced state-sanctioned monogamous marriages in favor of multiple sexual partnerships.

Progressive purity reformers were called to action partly because of new attitudes about female desire. During the nineteenth century, Victorian so-

cial theorists believed bourgeois women to be asexual; consequently, reformers saw prostitution as a "necessary evil," a way to quell the potentially dangerous sexual appetite of the white male. But by 1900 social theorists viewed all women—regardless of race or class—as sexual beings, capable of amative feelings and able to satisfy their husbands' passions, which rendered the prostitute's services obsolete. The English sexologist Havelock Ellis (*Studies in the Psychology of Sex*, 6 vols., 1897–1910) and the Swedish theorist Ellen Key (*Love and Marriage*, 1911), argued that women's sexual passions equaled men's. In this intellectual context, the "necessary evil" had become the intolerable "social evil." Local red-light abatement acts (beginning in 1909) and the federal Mann Act (1910) attempted to legislate prostitution out of existence.³¹

The rise of the physical-culture movement also challenged older ideals about female sexuality. Just as women's public activism contradicted prevailing notions about separate spheres, women's athleticism at the turn of the century confounded the standard of the neurasthenic, asexual woman. After she suffered a series of emotional breakdowns, Charlotte Perkins Gilman's husband subjected her to the monotonous "rest cure." But Gilman regained her strength and sanity only when she went back to her writing and her exercise routine at the gymnasium.³² Susan Cahn has noted that the women's physical-culture movement experienced some of its growth at new women's and coeducational colleges. The number of women attending college increased from 11,000 in 1870 to 85,000 in 1900 to 283,000 in 1920.³³ In a collegial setting, young women played basketball, baseball, tennis, and golf. Wage-earning women also participated in athletic activities. Factory managers extolled women's physical-education programs at the workplace to foster increased productivity and company loyalty. Settlement house workers, YWCA chapters, and local members of the Playground Association of America (1906) organized athletic events for urban children to promote better physical and moral health. Furthermore, the Progressive advocates of the playground movement may have designed urban play areas with the circus in mind: children could build their bodies and spirits by twirling on the Roman rings, or swinging on a tiny trapeze, just like well-toned circus acrobats.

Physical-education reformers posited that female athletic activity was crucial to moral, physical, and even "racial" well-being. During the "bicycle craze" of the late 1880s and 1890s, thousands of women took up the novel pastime of bicycling. Frances Willard, leader of the Woman's Christian Temperance Union, learned how to ride at the age of fifty-three. New

women's magazines frequently mentioned women's athleticism with exciting stories about exploring the world, training animals, or climbing mountains: "How I Climbed a 14,000-Foot Mountain," by Dora Keen, triumphantly recounted Keen's dangerous adventures on the Weisshorn in Switzerland.³⁴ In the context of women's participation in physical fitness, and the concurrent growth of a leisure culture in which a greater number of women became tourists, the lady thrill act—in which a woman rode a bicycle on a high wire or climbed a mountain—demonstrated women's public physicality in American culture.

But female athleticism had its share of critics. Despite the medical profession's general praise for the bicycle, several authorities claimed that cycling caused tremendous reproductive damage, specifically uterine displacement. Moreover, bicycle saddles reportedly allowed women to masturbate while riding, thereby reducing procreative desire and hastening the decline of native-born fecundity.³⁵ Still others charged that repeated cycling could create an ugly "bicycle face," characterized by a hard, clenched jaw and bulging eyes. Similarly, one commentator asserted that "circus face" was a malady brought on by excessive female athleticism under the big top.³⁶ Physicians and intellectuals called the female athlete and the "New Woman" a danger to traditional notions of domestic propriety.³⁷ The scientific community often represented them as "mannish," a liminal "third sex" neither female or male.³⁸ Theodore Roosevelt and the president of Clark University, G. Stanley Hall, both claimed that the progress of American civilization depended in part upon preserving sexual differentiation. They flatly stated that women should spend their reproductive lives as wives and mothers while men should dominate public life. Roosevelt, for one, growled, "When men fear work or fear righteous war, when women fear motherhood, they tremble on the brink of doom; and well it is that they should vanish from the earth."³⁹ In line with this logic, the New Woman was seen as largely responsible for "race suicide," because she delayed or refused motherhood in favor of higher education, paid labor, and public activism.⁴⁰ But the magazine *Ladies Home Calisthenics* (1890) argued that athletic activity in fact diminished the threat of race suicide, because female athletes were strong, healthy, and able to bear larger families.⁴¹

In the milieu of the women's physical-culture movement, audiences could read circus women's meager dress as a function of wholesome athleticism. Physical-fitness advocates argued that women's bodies should be free of tight, cumbersome clothing. An anticorset movement began in the 1830s and gained wide acceptance among physical-culture proponents by the end

of the century.⁴² Nineteenth-century anticorset advocates included Catharine Beecher, Dioclesian Lewis, and Thomas Wentworth Higgins, who charged that this fashionable device was responsible for respiratory difficulties, bodily malformations, and reproductive failure. The traveling phrenologist and nineteenth-century impresario Orson Fowler claimed that "tight lacing" caused shortness of breath, sexual excitement, and delirium: "Who does not know that, *therefore*, tight-lacing around the waist keeps the blood *from* returning freely to the heart, and *retains* it in the bowels and neighboring organs, and *thereby inflames all the organs of the abdomen*, which thereby *excites amative desires?*" (emphasis in original).⁴³

Around 1900 visual images of uncorseted female athletes were increasingly common, both in publications of the physical-culture movement and on the pages of the *Police Gazette*. Bernarr Macfadden, an athlete, publishing mogul, and huckster, placed photographs of unbound female athletes throughout the pages of his popular magazine *Physical Culture* to boost circulation rates. When Macfadden assumed management of the magazine in 1899, its anemic circulation was approximately 3,000. By 1901 Macfadden's vigorous marketing tactics and pictures of nearly nude women had caused circulation to skyrocket over 100,000!⁴⁴

The genesis of the American empire provided an important sociopolitical context in which circus proprietors could promote female nudity as instructive. Women's increased participation in the public sphere and the rise of physical culture enhanced circus women's public viability. But they alone do not sufficiently explain why showmen focused on the female performer as a symbol of the circus's propriety, because women in other areas of popular culture were still regulated. Anthony Comstock, for one, arrested Macfadden shortly before the Physical Culture Show of 1905 in New York City for presenting "lewd" pictures of reclining athletic women dressed in union suits and a man dressed in a leopard-skin breech cloth.⁴⁵ But popular images of exotic nudity in toys, games, storybooks, and ethnological exhibits became increasingly commonplace once the United States gained control of noncontiguous territories after the Civil War and the Spanish-American War.

World's fair organizers, the publishers of *National Geographic* (1888), and circus impresarios alike used nonwhite women's bodies to make educational claims. Racial "color" defined the degree of nudity that was deemed appropriate for display. *National Geographic*, for one, in 1896 first published photographs of bare-breasted black women.⁴⁶ Euroamericans easily accepted such photographs of women of color as edifying, while topless white women were

found only at seedy carnival cooch shows and nascent strip joints—not on the pages of a decent magazine or big "Sunday School" circus. *National Geographic* first photographed topless white women in the 1980s—and then only from behind!⁴⁷ Turn-of-the-century impresarios, however, still drew public attention to seminude white female bodies, but they used different strategies to do so.

"THE LADY DAINTY" UNDER THE BIG TOP

How did turn-of-the-century showmen transform the female circus athlete into a highly publicized "queen of the arena"? Looking at posters and press releases, one might conclude that women dominated the circus, because female aerialists, rope walkers, bareback riders, animal trainers, and acrobats were omnipresent in circus advertising. But these marketing efforts were disproportionate to women's actual numbers. For instance, in 1891 Adam Forepaugh employed thirty male and twelve female big-top performers.⁴⁸ Barnum & Bailey's circus in 1896 had sixty-two male and thirty-four female principal big-top players, in addition to approximately 1,000 chorus members and many sideshow acts.⁴⁹

Proprietors employed sentimental discourses of domesticity to neutralize the sexualized presence of strong, seemingly placeless circus women, who publicly exhibited themselves for pay in front of huge crowds. The circus woman supposedly abhorred modern life and shunned crowded cities during the off-season.⁵⁰ Circus press agents paid special attention to the origins of big-top women as a way to mitigate the possible public impression that circus women were anonymous, roving exhibitionists. Yet circus promoters paid little attention to the origins and social standing of the male acts. Circus media emphasized that the female performer never traveled alone; during the show season, her parents, brother, or husband invariably accompanied her, often appearing with her under the big top. Hardly a woman on the loose, she remained under the protective gaze of her family.

Showmen billed the typical female big-top player as a member of an old, distinguished family troupe, preferably from Europe (fig. 11). In contrast to the itinerant, tented American circus, the European circus was consistently respectable; intimate, one-ring productions took place in elaborate, permanent circus buildings in front of royalty and upper-class audiences. As a child, the American female big-top player reportedly learned her craft from her parents, who had performed for the crowned heads of Europe. One press release noted that over two-thirds of Barnum & Bailey's acts were

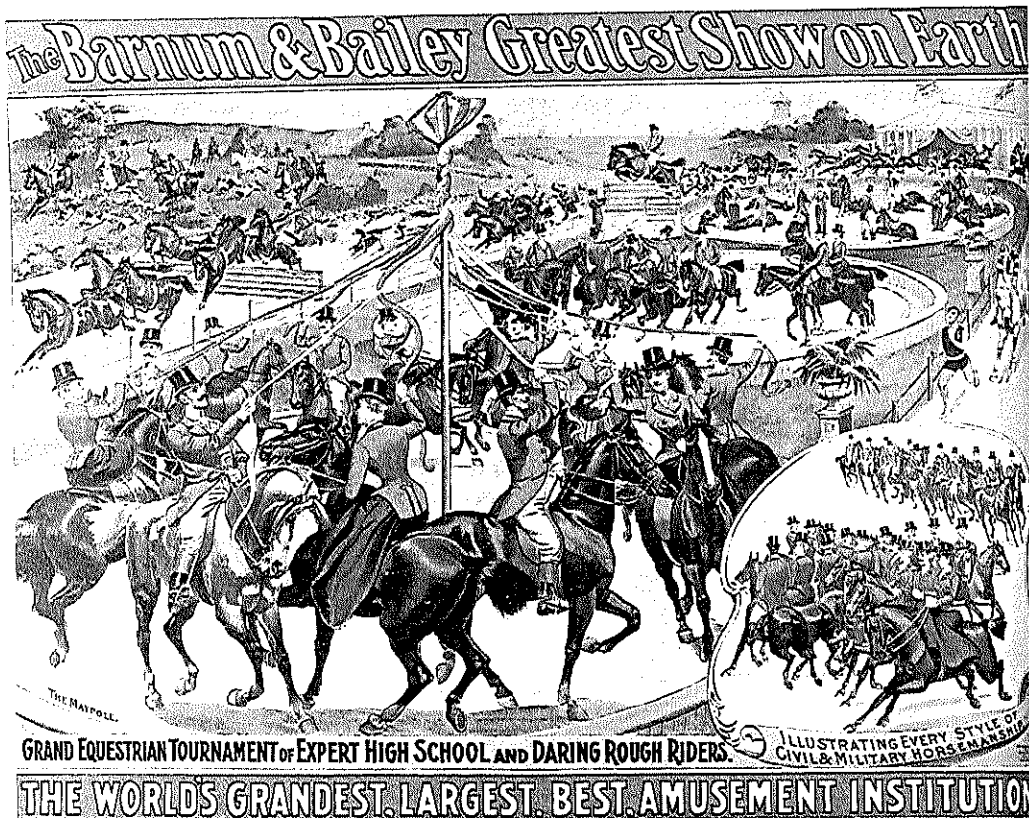


Figure 11. "Grand Equestrian Tournament," Barnum & Bailey, 1894. Crisp, fully clad poster scenes of "expert high school" equestrienne skills—cross-country jumping, fox hunting, and dressage—underscored showmen's claims that circus women were refined. (Lithograph courtesy of Circus World Museum, Baraboo, Wis., with permission from Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey,® The Greatest Show on Earth,® B+B-NL38-94-1F-1)

European, the majority of them English, and that the women of the circus were "ladies . . . of good breeding."⁵¹

Three circus stars of the early twentieth century, Josie DeMott Robinson, Lillian Leitzel, and May Wirth, came from old circus families. Robinson, an American bareback rider from the 1880s to the turn of the century, was the product of a long line of illustrious French riders and horse trainers who fraternized with Napoleon Bonaparte; Robinson grew up around the circus because her parents owned the DeMott and Ward Circus.⁵² Born in Breslau, Germany, in 1892, Leitzel became an aerialist as a child and per-

formed with her mother, Elinor Pelikan, a Czech aerialist. As part of her mother's troupe, the Leamy Ladies (named after their American manager, Edward T. Leamy), Leitzel came to the United States in 1908 and debuted with the Ringling Bros. circus in 1915 as a solo artist.⁵³ May Wirth, an Australian bareback rider born in 1894, was the daughter of impoverished, itinerant circus players. After May's parents separated when she was seven years old, she was adopted by the Wirths, a well-established Australian circus family. When May opened as a center-ring star for Ringling Bros. in 1912, press releases did not dwell on her indigent early childhood (which was well known in Australia, where some speculated that she was an aboriginal), but instead depicted her as a member of an old foreign circus family.⁵⁴

Circus media stressed female players' class status. Unlike many male big-top stars, or circus owners who promoted themselves as industrious "rags-to-riches" characters, female circus stars were supposed to be born into respectability. Upward mobility was a trope of the male capitalist, not the female performer. Barnum & Bailey's aerialist Nettie Carroll was reported to be a member of an aristocratic Ohio family. Beautiful "in face and form," Carroll was from the "smartest set," yet she chose the travel and excitement of circus life, despite her mother's desire that she settle down and get married.⁵⁶ Isabella Butler, an American who performed the "Dip of Death" with Barnum & Bailey from 1906 to 1908, was a "refined" student studying medicine at Vassar College.⁵⁶ Programs described Miss Lotta Jewel, a rider with the Carl Hagenbeck circus in 1906, as a paragon of elite American womanhood: "Miss Lotta Jewel is a splendid type of Gibsonesque American beauty and an ardent devotee of the invigorating and health-giving-out-of-door-life. A personal fortune has made possible liberal indulgence in her favorite pastimes—riding and driving—and she is the proud possessor of the finest stable of privately owned roadsters and saddle horses in New York City."⁵⁷

The unmarried woman performer was reportedly on the threshold of marriage. Days before a circus arrived, press agents like Barnum & Bailey's Tody Hamilton flooded local papers with titillating "inside" stories about circus women, such as "Quits Ballet for Fortune: Romance of an English Girl Who Married against the Wishes of Her Parents," "The Women of the Circus: How They Live and Love," and "Big Circus Tents Cover a Very Pretty Circus Romance: Fair Italian Acrobat Wears Her Lover's Picture on Her Collar: He Holds a Trusted Position."⁵⁸ In addition to heightening the audience's curiosity, these stories presented the single female big-top player

as a decent lady, who desired domesticity over the transient and potentially liberating life of sawdust and spangles.

Marriage was good publicity fodder, not limited to circus women; press agents frequently advertised impending nuptials for animal stars as well. The tantalizing prospect of sexual activity in captivity motivated animal “weddings” and drew big crowds to the menagerie. Primates, in particular, were popular subjects. A new scientific category in 1758, the order Primates had long been a metaphor, as the historian Donna Haraway has shown, for the politics of gender, race, class, and empire.⁶⁹ The union of two chimpanzees, Chiko “the \$10,000.00 Chimpanzee”⁶⁰ and Johanna, dominated Barnum & Bailey’s press releases in December 1893 while the menagerie was stationed at Central Park. Although the chimp couple never got closer than eight feet from each other,⁶¹ press agents wrote detailed accounts about their physical interaction: Chiko was sexually aggressive while Johanna was chaste; yet she had a “grip like steel,” and the couple fought furiously at their first meeting. One headline fairly shouted: “Chiko Wanted to Shake Hands but When Johanna Resented His Familiarity, He Nearly Tore His Lady Chimpanzee’s Ear Off.”⁶² Johanna humorously “aped” human conventions: “[S]he does whatever she sees people doing about her, as if anxious to get into the ‘swim’ of human society. She wears skirts and housewrappers, smokes cigarettes, stirs her toddy with a spoon, and drinks it off like a seasoned old justice.”⁶³ Circus writers waxed melodramatic when Chiko abruptly died at the end of the 1894 season: “His widow now bemoans her fate / He was so cute and slick, O! / And wears her mourning ‘up to date,’ / For was he not her Chiko?”⁶⁴ Johanna’s keeper, Matt McKay, observed that the grieving chimpanzee covered her eyes “with almost perfectly shaped hands” for nearly one month after Chiko’s death.⁶⁵

At the circus, animals were templates for human desire, for social norms and transgressions. Johanna, the strong, earthy chimp, caricatured the strict gender constructions that constricted her human coworkers: she was stronger than her husband, smoked cigars, and drank alcohol. But race shaped gender stereotypes, even in the “raceless” animal world, because press agents used the same stereotypes to describe Johanna that they used to advertise nonwhite women: Johanna was immodest and was brawnier and bolder than men (fig. 12). For that matter, Johanna and Chiko were caged next to people of color at the ethnological congress.

In another section of the same menagerie tent, the “Happy Family” presented a startling scene of domestic bliss (fig. 13). First presented at traveling menageries, this group of mortal animal enemies positioned together in

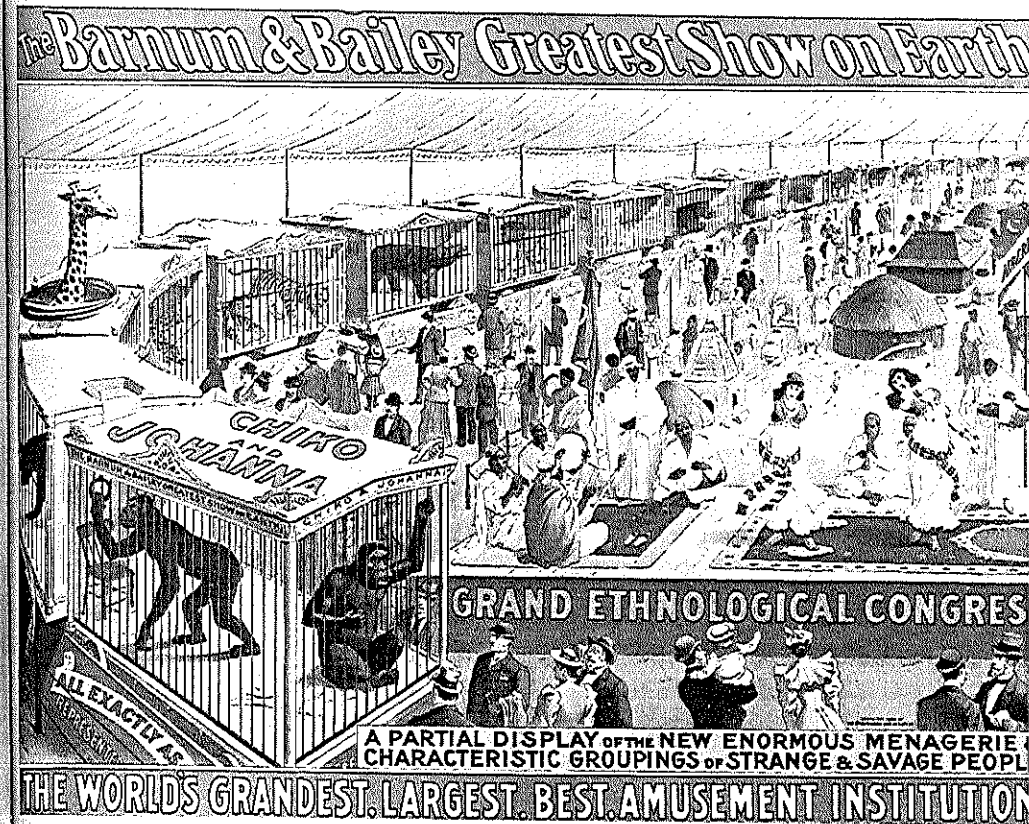


Figure 12. “Chiko and Johanna, Ethnological Congress,” Barnum & Bailey, 1894. Caged next to people of color from around the world, the two primates were racially scripted to represent a living evolutionary continuum. (Lithograph courtesy of Circus World Museum, Baraboo, Wis., with permission from Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey,® The Greatest Show on Earth,® B+B-NL38-94-1F-5)

the same cage became popular at P. T. Barnum’s American Museum (1841–68). There, on the fifth floor, Barnum exhibited his own “Happy Family”: a mélange of drowsy, well-fed monkeys, dogs, rats, cats, pigeons, owls, porcupines, guinea pigs, cocks, and hounds, all in the same large cage in front of thousands of self-styled “happy families” each day.⁶⁶

In contrast to the animals, the placeless Euroamerican female circus stars purportedly preferred life at home. These women reportedly had tea and sewing clubs, and according to one writer, “The thoughts of many of them as they go flying through hoops, or whirling through the air on a trapeze, are in some faraway home with their children.”⁶⁷ In a press release, Mrs.

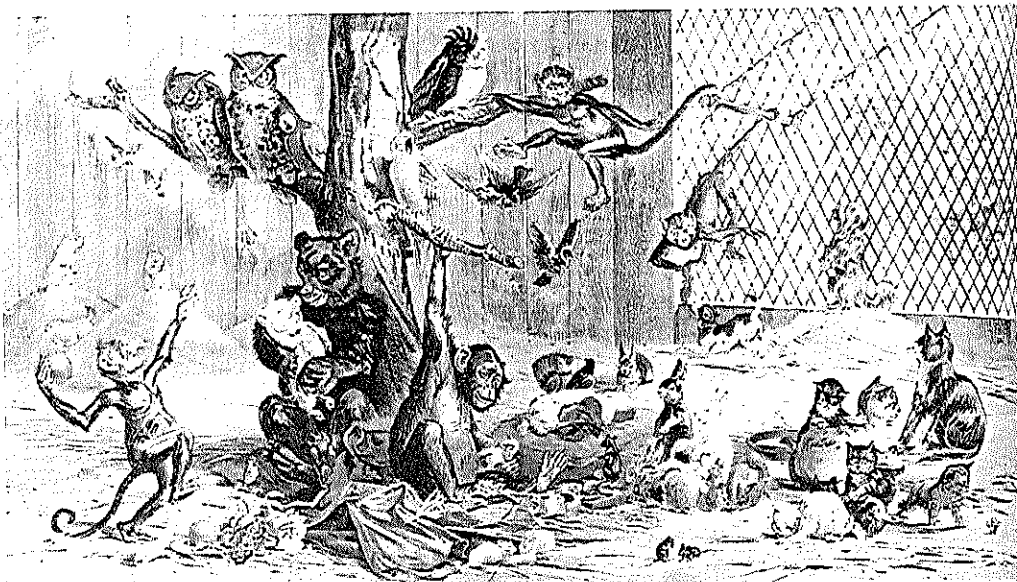


Figure 13. "Happy Family," or "Monkey Play," P. T. Barnum's Circus, Museum, and Menagerie, 1887. A staple of traveling menageries since the eighteenth century, this scene of domestic bliss inverted ordinary relationships of predator and prey: a bear cradles a pig and cats sit next to mice. (Interior program illustration courtesy of Buffalo Bill Historical Center, Cody, Wyo., MS6.Davidson.10)

George O. Starr, a former bareback rider, and "Zazel," a cannonball stunt artist who was married to a Barnum & Bailey manager, advertised the upright circus woman:⁶⁸ "The domestic instinct is very strong among circus women, for the reason that they are deprived of home life a great part of every year. She finds an outlet in many little ways, one of which is an appeal to the chef in charge of the dining car to be allowed to bake a cake. . . . [In some instances] [i]t isn't all unusual for them to go to one of the houses along near the track and ask the woman who lives there to let them use her kitchen. Almost always they get permission and afterwards pay her for it. They sew too, and many do pretty exceedingly fancy work."⁶⁹

In an interview with troupe members of the Barnum & Bailey circus in 1908, Harriet Quimby characterized the backstage environment as "wholesome," filled with modest females, many of them mothers whose children were also part of the production. Barnum & Bailey's press agent Dexter Fellows claimed that backstage one would "see the domestic side of a circus."⁷⁰ Dixie Willson, a secondary big-top player who rode in the opening spectacle, or tournament, with the Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey in 1921,

spent the \$22 that she earned in her first paycheck⁷¹ on curtains, pictures, a potted plant, silk pillows, and a rose-colored lamp for her four-by-six-foot home on the circus train.⁷² May Wirth, wearing her trademark pink bow in her bobbed brown hair as she performed a full forward somersault mid-gallop atop her horse, was portrayed as a sweet, shy young woman (fig. 14). After her marriage to Frank White (who took her surname) in 1919, not only was May the greatest woman rider in the world, she was reported to be a devoted wife, a sentiment captured nicely in this radio interview from 1942, five years after Wirth retired from the circus: "It was quite another kind of accident which took me out of the circus. . . . I fell in love. . . . Now I have a home in Forest Hills. We still have the horses and I still ride once in a while. But my main interest is discovering appetizing salads, planting successful flower gardens and tending to spring housecleaning."⁷³

Despite well-publicized claims of happy, nomadic family life, several circuses prohibited young (i.e. nonperforming) children from traveling with the show. In 1916 the bear trainers Emil Pallenberg and his wife were forced to leave their two-week-old son Emil Jr. on a farm in Connecticut for Barnum & Bailey's show season.⁷⁴ Jules Turnour, a clown, sadly recalled the death of his beloved son faraway in New York while Turnour was on the road. Just before going on to a packed house, he received a telegram from his wife saying that his son was gravely ill. "There I stood in fool's garb, with the hot tears streaming down my make-up. I heard a voice say merrily: 'Come, Jules, we're waiting for you.' So I had to go out into that crowded arena with a breaking heart, and disport myself that the mob might laugh—playing with a dummy [rag] child while my own lay dying."⁷⁵

Publicity pieces invariably mentioned the husbands of female stars to prove that women's primary loyalties lay with their husbands. Yet the reality contradicted these images. In 1906 Barnum & Bailey managers hailed Josie DeMott Robinson as a courageous heroine: Robinson had been retired from the circus from 1890 to 1905 after marrying Charles Robinson, son of the showman John Robinson, and reportedly returned as a noble way of easing her husband, a former politician, out of debt. In the words of one headline: "From Home of Riches to the Bareback Ring: Left Circus Ring as Rich Man's Bride: Returns to Aid Husband: Josie DeMott, Somersaulting Equestrian, Aiding Husband, the Son of Showman Robinson to Retrieve Losses."⁷⁶ But in reality, Robinson came back to the circus because she found married life as a "gillie" (circus outsider) suffocating. Through marriage and retirement, she had become a "mummy," "choked and imprisoned by corsets and fashion."⁷⁷ While in retirement, she took up bicycling to regain her strength



Figure 14. May Wirth, ca. 1924–27. A circus star in America since her center-ring debut with Ringling Bros. in 1912, Wirth engaged in strenuous bareback riding, contradicting showmen's attempts to market her as dainty and demure. (Photograph courtesy of Circus World Museum, Baraboo, Wis., BK-N45-WTHM-28)

and to avoid the corset, but ultimately Robinson was set free only when she left her husband and returned to the circus ring. Robinson felt that the circus was a haven: "I knew that world. I loved it, and I felt safe there."⁷⁸

Images of Annie Oakley were equally paradoxical—domestic and normative on the one hand, subversive on the other. Playing "Little Sure Shot" at Buffalo Bill's Wild West (1885–1902), Oakley was reported to be "the sweet heart of the entire male population of the country."⁷⁹ Proprietors advertised her as a homebody and true patriot who performed pro bono for American troops during World War I.⁸⁰ Her brother recalled that Oakley was "quick as a cat" in shooting, but nonetheless: "She was always a lady, always reserved and always modest. Wouldn't tie her shoes in front of a stranger. She was always a Christian, and she said her prayers every night on her knees, wherever she was, just like a trusting little child."⁸¹ Press agents depicted Oakley as a happy, devoted wife to her husband, Frank Butler, who frequently performed with her. Yet as the theater historian Tracy Davis points out, endangering her husband was a central part of Oakley's act. During her seventeen years with Buffalo Bill, Oakley frequently used Butler as her target—she shot apples off his head, or razed the ashes off his cigarette while he smoked. Furthermore, Oakley chose to perform in full, stereotypical western wear—cowboy hat, long skirt, vest, long-sleeved blouse, and boots—rejecting the brief garb of the circus woman. Press agents rarely noted Butler's part in Oakley's act, instead focusing on Oakley's good character and legendary self-taught shooting skills.⁸² Although showmen likely intended such promotions to diffuse the unsettling implications of a wife symbolically shooting her husband in public, these containment strategies were sometimes unsuccessful. For one, Hearst newspapers reported in 1903 that Oakley was a cross-dressing thief. But Oakley triumphed in the end after she sued Hearst for libel and won.⁸³

Impresarios extended women's love of domesticity to female animal trainers. Articles delighted in revealing that many lady lion tamers were afraid of mice and spiders.⁸⁴ Contemporary magazines acknowledged that the image of a "gentle" woman handling wild beasts was arousing: "When we go to see a woman run these risks, we give secret play to barbaric emotions which in spite of years of civilization are yet latent in us."⁸⁵ Female animal trainers and handlers were generally more physically interactive with their beasts than male trainers. Lucia Zora, whose husband Fred Alispaw taught her how to train animals with the Sells-Floto circus, performed several daring acts with her elephants and big cats. Her most spectacular act involved riding atop the tusks of Snyder, the killer elephant, while he stood on

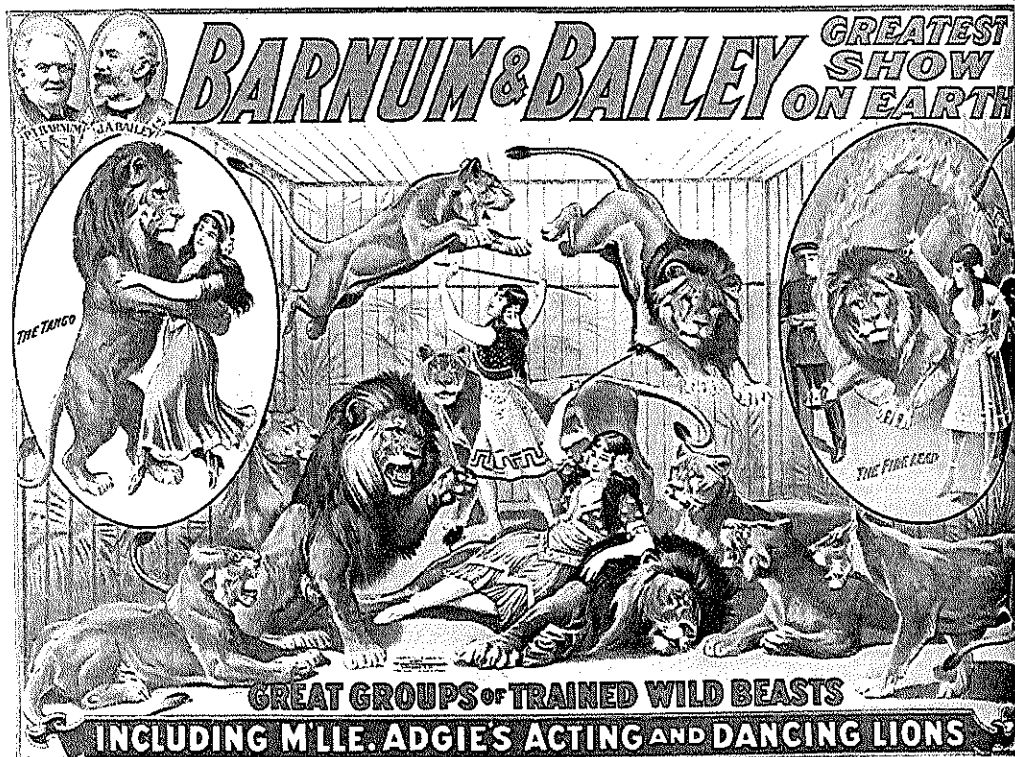


Figure 15. "Great Groups of Trained Wild Beasts," Barnum & Bailey, 1915. Sexually suggestive circus posters commonly depicted women trainers like Mademoiselle Adgie as more physically interactive with their nonhuman charges than male trainers. Here she performs the "tango" with one of her lions. (Lithograph courtesy of Circus World Museum, Baraboo, Wis., with permission from Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey,® The Greatest Show on Earth,® B+B-NL39-15-1F-5)

his hind legs.⁸⁶ Mabel Stark recalled that she got her first circus job with the Al Barnes circus in 1913 because the manager, Al Sands, thought that Stark, a petite blonde, would look alluring to audiences while she handled nasty tigers.⁸⁷ Stark created the first circus wrestling act with a tiger, in which she and Rajah (whom she raised from a cub) rolled around the sawdust arena to music.⁸⁸ Although women trainers wore protective paramilitary clothing during their acts, lithographs often depicted them in bare, glittering garb (fig. 15). Like their male cohorts, women animal trainers proudly recounted their stoicism. Stark recalled many instances of finishing her act with blood pouring into her boots from her lacerated thighs and calves while smiling calmly at the audience. Stark asserted, "I am not afraid. I like the challenge

of [the cats'] roaring defiance. . . . I know that my will is stronger than their rippling muscles."⁸⁹ Stark's bravado notwithstanding, programs referred to her as "the Lady Dainty in a den of ferocious tigers."⁹⁰ And despite the "masculine" strength and cool calm required for performing animal acts with elephants, bears, and big cats, showmen used these stunts to heighten prescribed gender differences. Women usually worked with smaller, non-threatening animals such as birds and dogs. The equestrienne and trainer Ella Bradna performed the "Act Beautiful," in which a bevy of trained birds, horses, and dogs assisted Bradna, the "Lady Dainty of the arena," in a "most beautiful and altogether delightful display of color and charm."⁹¹

Circus women also performed with automotive "brutes" and, in the 1920s, airplanes. The brothers Charles and J. Frank Duryea were bicycle engineers who built the first workable American gasoline-powered automobile in 1893; in the early twentieth century Henry Ford created affordable American cars based on European models like the 1901 Mercedes. Ford was so deluged with orders for his 1906 Model N that he was motivated to introduce his Model T in 1908, a more economical and reliable car.⁹² In this technological environment, the circus coupled this new mode of transportation with another nascent technology: flight. From 1905 to 1908 Barnum and Bailey featured the "L'Auto-Bolide, 'The Dip of Death,'" a chilling, highly dangerous automobile act in which the driver raced down a steep track, ending in a free-falling somersault before the car landed upright on a different track (fig. 16).⁹³ The stunt required complicated machinery: a four-story dromedary-shaped steel structure which held a forty-foot chasm—to be crossed by the somersaulting auto. The car was raised to the top of the platform with a cable in front of the audience, so that the crowd could "see the machine and study its construction." The driver, a French woman named Mademoiselle Mauricia de Tiers, entered the car at the top of the platform, sped down the steep track, performed the loop-de-loop, and landed upright on the other side of the track.⁹⁴ At San Francisco in 1905, "most of the crowd were satisfied that the quiet little French girl was flirting with the ferryman of the Styx when she trusted herself entirely to the laws of inertia. There was a universal sigh of relief when the dip of death was accomplished safely."⁹⁵

These acrobatic female stunt drivers were ubiquitous in circus advertisements. Tiers and Isabella Butler, the American woman who replaced her in 1906, were the subject of hundreds of Barnum & Bailey stories published throughout the United States and Canada. In all, impresarios described these women as small, beautiful, and well-bred "heroines," who were vulner-



Figure 16. "L'Auto Bolide," Barnum & Bailey, 1905. Transforming the already novel automobile into a flying object, this thrill act, as the poster suggests, was incredibly dangerous and expensive. (Lithograph courtesy of Circus World Museum, Baraboo, Wis., with permission from Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey,® The Greatest Show on Earth,® B+B-NL39-05-1F-4)

able yet fearless New Women. To prevent audiences from becoming bored with the lone flipping automobile, Barnum & Bailey's proprietors expanded the perilous act for the 1908 season: now two women, the sisters Caroline and Nettie Rague, drove separate cars down a 60 percent grade on separate tracks, one underneath the other. One car somersaulted across a twenty-foot chasm while the other simultaneously shot out straight beneath it. Both landed on the other side of the track at the same time.⁹⁶

Women's costuming was another vehicle for domestication and eroticism. Circus media constantly justified bare apparel with stories about healthy, wholesome female circus athletes. Brief clothing was also critical to the safety of circus women, who somersaulted atop galloping horses,

twirled through space from the flying trapeze, gyrated madly on the Roman rings, and pranced around on the high wire forty feet aloft (fig. 17). In addition, performers and proprietors justified scant dress as evidence of good character. Julia Lowanda, a popular Cuban-born bareback rider at the turn of the century, reasoned that the circus woman's athletic activity made her more seemly than the society woman: "We never keep the shockingly late hours of the society maiden or matron, and the fact that we live almost entirely in the open air makes us strong and healthy. In fact, instead of being dyspeptic and irritable, we find life worth living and we are cheerful."⁹⁷ A Hagenbeck-Wallace circus program also pointed to female circus athletes' vigor: "Circus women . . . keep in good health by taking two or three cold baths daily in the dressing tents and by plenty of physical exercise out of doors."⁹⁸

In the ring, the nearly nude female body was both sexually attractive and strong. Yet outside the ring, showmen classified these muscular bodies into normative categories. Josie DeMott Robinson recalled that upon leaving the ring in her scanty costume, she was required to don a long skirt immediately: "Of course skirts would endanger our lives when we were performing so scanty attire was the thing, but the minute the act was over out came the long skirt or cloak immediately, and I was told not to be so immodest as to stand around half naked. There was no sense in it."⁹⁹

Impresarios used well-publicized employee conduct rules to bolster their claims of female propriety. Many work rules applied exclusively to women and dictated their off-duty dress and bedtime. Robinson remembered that even allowing a man to help her put on her coat was forbidden.¹⁰⁰ However, men were generally exempt from such rules. As a bachelor, the trick rider Al Mann freely fraternized with local women while the circus was in town. He dated several women and was often invited to family dinners.¹⁰¹ Among circus women, ballet girls received special scrutiny. The work contract for Kathy Edwards, a ballet girl for the Ringling Bros. in 1913, detailed a series of supplementary regulations for ballet girls that did not apply to male employees. If Edwards violated these rules, she could have been fired and easily replaced: "3) Ladies should be in sleeping cars at a reasonable hour after the night performance, as per instructions from Ballet Master. 4) Board and sleeping accommodations being furnished by Ringling Bros., all ladies are expected regularly and orderly to avail themselves of same. 5) Male companions during hours when not on duty, strictly prohibited. 6) Flirting and boisterous conduct at all times and places, prohibited."¹⁰² Other contracts specified that ballet girls be "neat and modest in appearance. . . . Do not



Figure 17. May Wirth (left) and Lillian Leitzel, 1924. Tights and short dress were sensible clothing for circus performers, allowing them complete freedom of movement. (Photograph courtesy of Circus World Museum, Baraboo, Wis., BBK-N45-WTHM-14)

dress in a flashy, loud style; [g]irls must not stop at Hotels at any time. . . . The excuse of 'accidental' meetings [with male members of the Show Company] will not be accepted."¹⁰³ These regulations were marked with an endnote where the Ringling Bros. management justified its policies: "If some of the rules seem harsh and exacting, please remember—experience has taught the management that they are necessary. It is intended to protect the girls in every possible way. Good order and good behavior are necessary, if you are to be comfortable and happy."¹⁰⁴

Big-top women also enforced unwritten codes of conduct among themselves. While working as a statue girl for Barnum & Bailey in 1916, Tiny Kline observed that nude bathing was "taboo" in the ladies' dressing room. "[A]ccording to the rules of those ladies—the aristocrats—[star big-top acts] who dictated the 'laws'; no self-respecting female would disrobe completely, without the shield of a kimono or bath-robe which was kept over her constantly during her bath. She would remove her outer garments and immediately get under the robe, which, hanging from her shoulders, served as a private bath-house while removing her under garments, then fastening it under the arms she would proceed with her bath."¹⁰⁵ Kline and the statue girls, however, bathed completely nude in a cramped area partitioned off from the rest of the ladies' dressing room: the successful removal of the sticky greasepaint required total nudity so that everything nearby would be kept free of paint. Kline observed that the self-imposed mandate on modesty was vigorously enforced, suggesting that codes of virtuous conduct were not simply imposed by domineering proprietors but were internalized by the players themselves.¹⁰⁶

To demonstrate to the rest of the world that circus women were well policed, proprietors freely publicized their stringent female conduct rules. An article in the *Evening Telegram* in New York City referred to the rules in a long defense of the circus woman's high scruples: "Circus women belong to that vast majority that will have 'Misunderstood' put on as headstones. It is a curious thing that the general impression of these women of the sawdust is that they live as high as they swing or jump and that figuratively speaking their existence is one prolonged vortex of spangles and tights. As a matter of fact, nothing could be more erroneous. . . . Don't you see that no women could lead more protected lives? . . . And when you remember that a circus woman is almost invariably married, and that her husband is with her, you will see that the moral standard of the profession is high."¹⁰⁷

Posters occasionally depicted women acts in long, flowing gowns and puffy, high-collared shirtwaists—clothing which was extremely dangerous

if worn in performance. Months before a show date, rural and urban residents saw these curious poster scenes depicting fully skirted women whirling off the trapeze, or poised atop a horse. A few acts, such as the Meers sisters (Ouika and Mari), did perform equestrian acts in street dress: a Barnum & Bailey program in 1896 promised a performance “with grace and skill while costumed in long skirts, all the difficult feats executed by the famed male riders.”¹⁰⁸ That same year, a lithograph advertising the Arrigosi Sisters, an iron jaw and trapeze act with the Forepaugh & Sells Brothers circus, depicted the sisters twisting, bending, and flying through midair in long dresses: “First American Appearance of the Flying Wonders. The Arrigosi Sisters. In Their Astonishing High Trapeze. Long Skirt Evolutions, Leaps and Dives” (fig. 18).

Although such dangerous costuming was uncommon, press agents for Barnum & Bailey waged a media campaign about a fictional “gowning revolution” from 1904 to 1906. Press releases stated that several principal female performers, led by the star equestrienne Rose Wentworth, preferred the latest Paris fashions—complete with hair worn long in bows and combs—to traditional circus garb. From all accounts, this trend was a smash with audiences.¹⁰⁹ Newspapers reported that Wentworth mastered wearing the cumbersome long skirt in the arena by eliminating the hoops and learning how to jump a horse in her street clothes.¹¹⁰ These articles, however, variously identified the founder of the “movement” as Wentworth, Josie DeMott Robinson, or someone else, thus making the entire “gowning revolution” suspect. All accounts stressed the sudden absence of tights at the newly clothed circus: “There are tights, plenty of them, but they again, are almost the exclusive trademark of the merry . . . burlesquer.”¹¹¹ Circus press agents sought to distance their productions from “tawdry” burlesque shows featuring “bold” talking women who jeered at their audiences. In contrast, the circus lady was almost always silent during her act.

But these fashionable, fully clad circus women were provocative in many respects: presented as high-society women, they had athletic skills that were heightened by their ability to perform daring feats in long skirts—a humorous inversion of normative behavior for women. Placed in an entertainment space where bareness was the norm, formal street dress was unusual and provocative—the circus woman’s constant jostling on the trapeze, high wire, or horse provided audiences with constant opportunities to “peek” underneath her skirts. The gowning campaign kept audiences guessing about what the circus woman really wore, creating anticipation for a potential striptease: Would she be fully dressed or not? Or might she actu-



Figure 18. “The Arrigosi Sisters,” Adam Forepaugh and Sells Brothers, 1896. In an attempt to market their shows as “moral,” showmen occasionally depicted women performers in full gowns. Note the iron-jaw lady performing the “slide for life” down a wire, and the vigorous trapeze work in the foreground. (Lithograph courtesy of Circus World Museum, Baraboo, Wis., with permission from Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey, © The Greatest Show on Earth, © A4PS-NL33-96-1F-2)

ally undress in front of the circus audience? Some contemporary vaudeville companies and smaller circuses presented “disrobing” acts on the trapeze and high wire; female aerialists wore layers of clothing which they speedily abandoned until they were dressed in fleshlings and a leotard. On January 19, 1912, Lillian Leitzel’s mother, Eleanor Pelikan, graced the cover of *Vanity Fair* performing an iron jaw disrobing act. The magazine claimed that the “Aerial Venus” would “carefully remove every part of her costume,” yet she finished the act in basic circus garb.¹¹²

The circus press abruptly stopped its “revolution in gowning” campaign in December 1906. Barnum & Bailey’s agent W. D. Coxey announced that management had issued a moratorium on long skirts for the 1907 season.

In line with other advocates of the cult of the strenuous life, Coxe now argued, once again, that the well-muscled female body was healthful and inspirational:

The human form, when it reaches a high form of symmetry and muscular development, is something to be proud of, whether in man or woman. This old puritanical idea, that because a woman displayed her figure in tights, she was outside the pale of society, has given way to a sane and sensible admiration for the physically perfect woman. There is no reason why tights should not be preferable to gowns in the circus arena. No matter how clever the performer may be, long skirts interfere with the free movement of the body. It is also a question of whether they are not a serious detriment from the standpoint of health. Tights for women in the circus are proper, modest, attractive, and hygienic, and a return to them will be welcomed by the public.¹¹⁵

Men also wore tights, but circus media generally ignored them. Yet articles used tights to describe ballet girls in prurient terms, as a "prolonged vortex of spangles and tights."¹¹⁴ One headline screamed, "A Circus in Undress."¹¹⁵ Tights figured heavily in reportage about Miss Evetta Mathews, an acrobatic English lady clown who performed with Barnum & Bailey in 1895. A proponent of physical culture, Mathews participated in "all of the new woman's fads" (including wearing bloomers) and "does everything a man does to keep herself in proper trim" (plate 3).¹¹⁶ But her most riveting attribute was her "shocking" pink fleshings. Allegedly, she strolled out of the center ring at Madison Square Garden during her act and sat down in a group of men. The ringmaster offered her \$5 to return to the ring, but she replied that a young man had offered her \$10 to stay,¹¹⁷ so why should she leave? The press release then teased audiences into coming to see what Mathews might do next: "There is nothing in her appearance to indicate that she is a clown or a lady, but the appearance of pink tights at such short range created almost a panic on the south side of the house."¹¹⁸ Mathews did not see herself in such lurid terms, however. She thoroughly enjoyed her life with the circus and viewed her success as evidence of women's ability to excel in traditionally "male" fields:

I believe that a woman can do anything for a living that a man can do, and I do it just as well as a man. All of my people laughed at me when I told them that I was going into the ring as a clown; but they do not laugh now when they see that I can keep an engagement all the time, and earn

as much money and more than they can in their branches of the business. I like the work and try to put ideas into it. Every day I think out something new and the management usually gives me pretty wide latitude. My chief difficulty is making myself heard, but then nobody ever listens to what a clown says; everything depends on the antics.¹¹⁹

Although circus women like Mathews gained a real sense of empowerment from their work, impresarios diminished their subversive potential by positioning them back into more standardized representations of the erotic female body. One could find this sort of normative female spectacle across the show. In the free morning street parade, proprietors primarily picked young, comely women to ride in the mounted sections. Older women often appeared in "oriental" costumes but were told to wear veils over their faces so as to hide their age from the spectators.¹²⁰ Some showmen doctored posters of women to make them more salable. In the 1920s the Ringlings' press agent Roland Butler used photographs of Ziegfeld Follies dancers in place of the well-chiseled female circus stars in programs. Butler altered the dancers' faces so that they would resemble actual circus stars, while retaining the curvaceous Ziegfeld bodies. Butler even substituted a full-length picture of a "Follies" performer for that of a big-top performer, the famous bareback rider Flora Bedini, who consequently did not speak to Butler for nearly twenty years. "[Flora] was real circus," Butler stated, "but she was about as photogenic as a bagful of gravel. We couldn't run anything like that in the program."¹²¹

The normative exhibition of the female body reached its fullest form with the ballet girl. Despite the pretensions of high culture that the title "ballet girl" implied, the job required little skill other than the ability to look attractive in scant costumes. Harry Conlon, an electrician seeking employment with the Ringling Bros. in 1903, requested work as a ballet girl for his wife, whom he described as "of very good appearance and very quick to learn anything." Managers responded by asking Conlon to send a picture of his wife, along with details about her height, weight, and complexion; they did not inquire about her skills as a performer.¹²² One former circus owner, Fred Pfening Jr., recalled that during the days of the American Circus Corporation outfits (1921-29), circus managers used to refer to the day when ballet girls were hired as "choosing day," because owners and managers would each "choose" a ballet girl to be their companion during the season.¹²³

Also known as "chorus girls," and "oriental dancers," sometimes over

1,000 ballet girls were hired each year to participate in the morning parade, dance in the opening spectacle or tournament, and perform other unspecified duties “as needed.” Supposedly, thousands of “aggressive and attractive” women stormed Bolossy and Imre Kiralfy’s auditions in order to work at the circus.¹²⁴ Press agents lured potential audiences by crafting teasing stories about vulnerable chorus girls who gazed directly at male audience members: “A . . . French [ballet] girl can find more accidental ways of looking a man in the eye than are in the imagining power of most men, nor does the young woman of the Kiralfy chorus glance quickly away when her glance is met. She has nothing to be ashamed of. She was merely looking your way. There’s no reason why she should stop, and then . . . around the corner of her mouth . . . and from somewhere near her paint-encircled eyes, a friendly smile, and a sigh betokening helpless loneliness and suffering. And the stranger finds himself right up in the blue [cheap seating area] line of arena hustlers working their shoulders one way and another to get a place for a better view.”¹²⁵

Whether portraying a Moroccan concubine in “Columbus and the Discovery of America” (1892), a South Asian *nautch* dancer (temple dancer) in “The Durbar of Delhi” (1904), or the “Wizard Prince of Arabia” (1914), the ballet girl wore heavy eyeliner, lipstick, a dark wig, and filmy, pseudo-oriental costumes, all to render her a more “authentic” Other (fig. 19). Owners consciously chose to costume the ballet girl in skimpy dress, though in fact Islamic women were often garbed from head to toe, in accord with the tenets of female modesty in the *Shari’a* (Islamic law). When planning the Ringling Bros.’ spectacle “King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba” (1914), Al and Charles Ringling recognized that the spec would be more culturally authentic if the ballet dresses were floor-length, but they nevertheless agreed to shorten the dresses to the knee, because, according to Al, doing so would “make the ballet look better.”¹²⁶

At first glance, it might seem that the circus’s emphasis on the ballet girl’s sensuality would undermine its claims to highlight respectable white womanhood. But as a disguised character, the ballet girl complemented the racist writings of contemporary European and American theorists and novelists. The best-selling author Thomas Dixon wrote that nonwhite races were both promiscuous and violent.¹²⁷ At the same time, African American activists, including Addie Hunton, fought against these virulent stereotypes in articles like “Negro Woman Defended.”¹²⁸ In *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), W. E. B. Du Bois undermined racist explanations of black sexual “immorality” by analyzing the structural reasons—tenancy, debt, and other



Figure 19. “The Wizard Prince of Arabia,” Barnum & Bailey, 1914. As part of a literal cast of thousands, Euroamerican ballet girls played an exotic, indeterminate racial Other in these extravagant orientalist productions. (Lithograph courtesy of Circus World Museum, Baraboo, Wis., with permission from Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey,® *The Greatest Show on Earth*,® B+B-NL39-14-1F-3)

forms of institutionalized racism—that forced African American women to delay marriage and bear children out of wedlock.¹²⁹

The racially masked ballet girl also resonated with broader imperial imaginings. Edward Said observes that the sexually charged “oriental” woman was a common character in nineteenth-century European fiction who personified the alluring, geographically imprecise “Orient” as a literary sexual playground for repressed bourgeois European protagonists.¹³⁰ In a similar spirit, Imre Kiralfy’s circus spec “Columbus and the Discovery of America” (1892) depicted the ersatz Moroccan women as lascivious: “Our tableau opens with King Boabdil El Chico, surrounded by his wives, favorites and slaves. . . . Presently music greets the ear, the female slaves begin the slow, sensuous movements of oriental dances, while songs by female



Figure 20. Albert Hodgini as "The Original Miss Daisy," 1907. Hodgini was such a good drag bareback rider that he reportedly received marriage proposals from European noblemen. (Photograph courtesy of Circus World Museum, Baraboo, Wis., BBK-N45-HDGA-7)

slaves are heard accompanied by the wild, weird, mysterious music of quaint instruments, and the scene gradually becomes one of splendour."¹⁵¹

The ballet girl's persona was a model for other forms of popular culture. The early movie producer Richard Fox paid white actresses to become explicitly provocative with makeup and scant dress—the tools of racial masking. In the years surrounding World War I the actress Theodosia Goodman, a Jewish woman from Cincinnati, became "Theda Bara," an anagram for "Arab Death." Bara's birth was fictionalized and exoticized: she was born "on the desert sands in the shadow of the Sphinx." Her steamy performance in *A Fool There Was* in 1915, based on Rudyard Kipling's poem "The Vampire," created the word "vamp."¹⁵²

Gender masking was another element of disguise at the circus. Big-top "women" who were really men were costumed and marketed in virtually the same manner as "dainty darlings." Reported to be extremely desirable, they were also from good families. Albert Hodgini, sporting a cascade of thick, long, brown curls, smooth skin, and a small, corseted waist, played the "Original Miss Daisy" with the Ringling Bros. from 1908 to 1914 (fig. 20). English by birth, Hodgini's circus family tried to make itself more intriguing and salable by changing its name from Hodges to Hodgini, to capitalize on Anglo and American stereotypes of Italians as a racial Other. To establish his credibility with the audience as a woman, Albert Hodgini began his act by riding sidesaddle. Eventually, he performed a series of handstands atop a horse, somersaulted madly, and then juggled a bunch of bottles and plates while still riding the same horse. Reportedly, Hodgini attracted wealthy male suitors who were later embarrassed once they found that Miss Daisy was a man.¹⁵³ In some respects, Hodgini's act was radical because it demonstrated that gender was a fluid, performative category: wearing the correct clothing, makeup, and wig, Hodgini could play female.

But Hodgini's potential ability to cross gender boundaries was limited, paradoxically, by the very gender norms that his act denaturalized. Hodgini's act deftly brought potential gender transgressions back into the rubric of respectability, because his gender play suggested that there was a single standard of appropriate female appearance and comportment. Although his identity as Miss Daisy was secret, press releases constantly teased audiences about Hodgini's "real" identity by stating that Miss Daisy performed stunts that a woman had yet to accomplish. When his maleness was eventually "discovered" by the circus press—ever hoping to in-

crease a performer's salability—Hodgini's publicity photographs confirmed his identity as a decent family man with a wife and two children (fig. 21). As Judith Butler suggests, drag is not intrinsically subversive; instead, showmen could use it to bolster social norms.¹⁵⁶

By 1920 the female big-top performer's paradoxical image of domesticated eroticism made her a perfect candidate to sell products in the new modern age of mass consumption. Several female circus performers, particularly the big stars of the decade, May Wirth, Lillian Leitzel, and Bird Millman, endorsed various products from sheet music to face cream. In programs, advertisements for the Harry von Tilzer Music Publishing Co. splashed a photograph of the Australian American bareback rider May Wirth and her "great big hit" "When My Baby Smiles at Me" across the page. Advertisements for the Leo Feist sheet music company described how the singing wire walker Bird Millman performed her act to the popular tune "Peggy." The aerialist Lillian Leitzel pitched a cornucopia of products: Lysol, the Walworth Stillson wrench, and Grandma Brown's ginger tea tablets.¹⁵⁶

A highly visible presence in circus advertising during the 1920s, Lillian Leitzel led an exciting romantic life that enhanced her popular appeal for American consumers. She was married three times and divorced her first two husbands—an anonymous property man and Clyde Ingalls, the Ringling Bros.' flamboyant sideshow manager. In 1927 she and her third husband, Alfredo Codona, the handsome Mexican trapeze artist, were hailed as the Douglas Fairbanks and Mary Pickford of the circus. At the turn of the century, when remnants of Victorian prudery remained in force, Leitzel's turbulent marital life might have been kept secret. But in the 1920s, the details of Leitzel's romances were well known, enhancing her magnetic "personality" and her ability to sustain public interest.¹⁵⁶ Discussions of female sexuality and desire were moving increasingly into the mainstream: educated Americans widely read the writings of Sigmund Freud and Havelock Ellis, greater numbers practiced birth control, and fertility rates continued falling. Contemporary advertising and movies brimmed with images of independent, flirtatious "flappers"—pictured occasionally in swimsuits, especially after Gertrude Ederle swam across the English Channel in 1926 in record time.¹⁵⁷ In this social environment, press agents easily marketed Leitzel as both a dynamic "personality" and a paragon of domesticity, devoted to her home on the road, pampering her bulldogs, nursing injured animals, playing the piano, and telling stories to small children.¹⁵⁸



Figure 21. "Mr. and Mrs. Hodgini," undated. From drag performer to family man, Hodgini easily played both at the circus. (Photograph courtesy of Circus World Museum, Baraboo, Wis., BBK-N45-HDGA-8)

THE SIDESHOW AND ETHNOLOGICAL CONGRESS

Unlike the big top, where thousands of audience members sat far from the constant action in the ring, the sideshow tent was small enough that patrons could ask performers questions.¹³⁹ At the sideshow, the player's body—not her athletic skill—was the source of her marketability. As a rule, showmen categorized sideshow acts as either “born” (for the congenitally deformed or racially exotic), or “made” (when the acts involved conscious bodily disfigurement, specifically tattooing or glass eating, among other stunts). The sociologist Robert Bogdan notes that in an era before the professionalization of medical science, the sideshow's appeal lay in the ability of audiences to judge for themselves what the freaks “had.”¹⁴⁰ Likewise, the literary scholar Rosemarie Garland Thomson suggests that the freak show itself was a product of the “tensions of modernity,” because it threw into sharp focus two competing worldviews: an older, religious one that viewed the freak as a product of the supernatural, and a newer, rational, professionalized scientific one that pathologized physical abnormality.¹⁴¹

Located inside the menagerie tent, the ethnological congress of “strange and savage tribes” physically collapsed human and animal boundaries in spectacular acts of Otherness like the sideshow (fig. 22). Zoological proprietors pioneered these systematic, full-blown exhibits of exotic people with animals.¹⁴² In 1874 the German animal dealer and zoo owner Carl Hagenbeck first incorporated “natives” into his foreign animal displays, after a friend, the animal painter Heinrich Leutemann, suggested that a family of Lapps would render a display of reindeer “most picturesque.”¹⁴³ In his memoirs Hagenbeck recalled, “This seemed to me a brilliant idea. . . . My optimistic expectations were fully realized; this first of my ethnographic exhibitions was from every point of view a huge success. I attributed this mainly to the simplicity with which the whole thing was organized, and to the complete absence of all vulgar accessories. There was nothing in the way of a performance.”¹⁴⁴ Banking on the proven success of this sort of premeditated “naturalness” and absence of “performance,” Barnum and London presented their first ethnological congress in 1886, at which “even the best informed and most intellectual had something to learn when visiting the show.”¹⁴⁵ James Bailey, who planned the exhibit in 1885, sent two American agents around the world to collect human specimens for future productions. Much like Hagenbeck, Bailey claimed that he originally conceived of the ethnological congress as scenery for his exhibit of sacred cattle from Thailand.

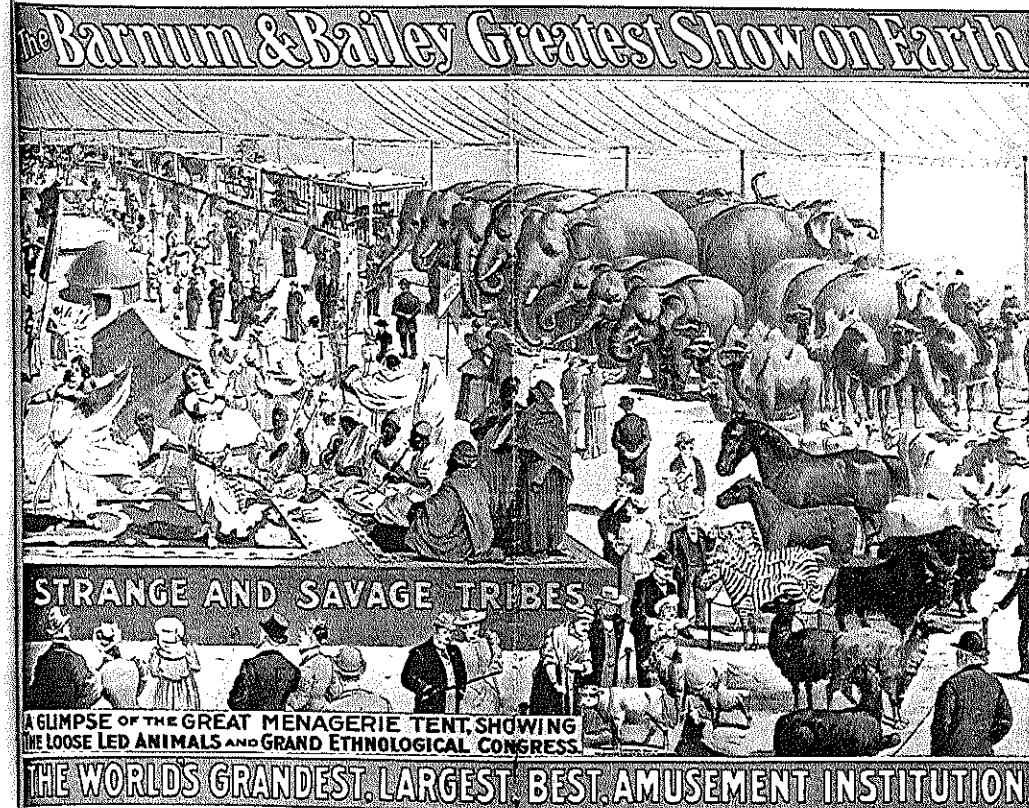


Figure 22. “Ethnological Congress” (companion lithograph to fig. 12), Barnum & Bailey, 1894. Note the presence of the well-appointed Euroamerican families viewing the display of the “strange and savage tribes” as an instructive exercise. (Lithograph courtesy of Circus World Museum, Baraboo, Wis., with permission from Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey,® *The Greatest Show on Earth*,® B+B-NL38-94-1F-6)

By surrounding the cows with authentic Siamese people, Bailey hoped to render the cattle more “authentic.”¹⁴⁶ Inspired by the great financial success of similar ventures at international exhibitions—from Paris to Chicago—Barnum & Bailey proprietors in 1894 expanded their ethnological displays of people of color.¹⁴⁷

From fat ladies, bearded ladies, and lady giantesses to armless and legless ladies, Euroamerican women freaks were seemly ladies in press releases, in programs, and on postcards (which virtually all freaks sold to supplement their income). “Fat Marie” Lil, a fat lady for Barnum & Bailey,

presented herself as an innocent English school girl, wearing prim outfits laden with ruffles. Articles detailed her “delightful” complexion, her vast daily diet, her sensitivity and modesty: Lil always took her dinner in private after people laughed at her inability to fit her knees under the table at a restaurant.¹⁴⁸ Newspaper articles described Lil’s love of food and her desire to gain weight: at 389 pounds, Lil was still lighter than her mother, who weighed 420 pounds. Her father, in contrast, was “a little, slim man.”¹⁴⁹ Press releases might exaggerate a fat lady’s size or appetite, but she was always presented as innocent, never sexually potent.

But the marriage of two freaks—whether real or staged as a publicity stunt—kept audiences wondering about the bodily logistics of sexual activity, much in the same manner that people speculated about sex between circus animal “couples.” Bodily deformity, like animality and racial non-whiteness, was a license, an acceptable avenue through which to discuss sexuality.¹⁶⁰ Press agents hinted at the possibility of sexual activity through the conventional trope of marriage. Circuses commonly presented opposites together: the Skeleton Man and the Fat Lady, or midgets with giants, like Ella Ewing, the eight-foot, four-inch “lady giantess,” with the twenty-three-inch “Great Peter the Small” (fig. 23).

In circuses throughout the country, the fat lady commonly “married” her sideshow coworker, the Skeleton Man. Hannah Battersby, who reportedly weighed 600 pounds, was married to her fellow Barnum & Bailey sideshow performer Jonathan Battersby, a “Living Skeleton” who weighed seventy pounds.¹⁶¹ Like Barnum’s highly publicized union of the midget couple Lavinia Warren and Tom Thumb in 1863, marriages of this kind in all likelihood enabled audiences to imagine the Fat Lady in sexual situations, particularly with the willowy Skeleton Man, whom she might crush to death during sexual intercourse.

Outfitted in Victorian dress, motherhood and refinement defined the Euroamerican bearded lady. Impresarios noted that Madame Josephine Fortune Clofillia, a Swiss bearded lady (and one of P. T. Barnum’s first hirsute acts in the 1850s), possessed official medical certificates confirming her two children’s births.¹⁶² Programs noted that Grace Gilbert was desirable and had numerous marriage proposals, despite her full, flowing beard. On stage since the age of twelve months as the bearded “Infant Esau”¹⁶³ (later the “Lady Esau”), Annie Jones was an accomplished musician of good character.¹⁶⁴ Divorced and then widowed, Jones spent her entire life as a bearded performer. After her death at thirty-seven in 1903, Barnum & Bailey publicized Jones’s supposed dying wish that her husband, the press

THE BARNUM & BAILEY GREATEST SHOW ON EARTH.

TWO LIVING HUMAN PRODIGIES
MIDGET MAN AND GIANT GIANTESS

A PERFECT LITTLE GENTLEMAN WEIGHING ONLY SIX POUNDS.
 A CYCLOPEAN YOUNG LADY WEIGHING OVER 300 POUNDS.

THE LITTLEST AND THE BIGGEST MORTALS SIDE BY SIDE
 A VERITABLE FEMALE COLOSSUS AND HER MICROSCOPIC GENTLEMAN ESCORT

THE ANTIPODES OF HUMANITY
 IN VERY TRUTH A MEETING OF LIVING EXTREMES, TOGETHER PRESENTING THE MOST WONDERFUL EXHIBITION OF THE GIANT AND THE PIGMY EVER SEEN

ABSOLUTELY THE TALLEST LADY ON EARTH
 A TRUE GIANTESS FAR EXCEEDING IN HEIGHT ALL OTHER GIANTS THAT EVER LIVED.

EMPHATICALLY THE SMALLEST MAN ON EARTH
 A REAL LILIPUTIAN FAR LESS IN INCHES THAN ANY OTHER PIGMY EVER BORN

THE GIANTESS TALLER AND THE MIDGET SMALLER THAN ALL OTHER HUMAN BEINGS OF WHOM THERE IS ANY RECORD.

THE LARGEST AND LEAST OF LIVING HUMANITY
 MISS ELLA EWING THE MOST GIANTIC LADY AND GREAT PETER THE SMALLEST MORTAL THAT EVER EXISTED. NEARLY 9 FEET HIGH AND THE MOST MINUTE MORTAL THAT EVER LIVED.

Figure 23. “Two Living Human Prodigies” (Ella Ewing and Great Peter the Small), Barnum & Bailey, 1897. Sideshow acts were animated by the juxtaposition of opposites. Despite Ewing’s financial independence and very public career, she praised marriage and motherhood as the “proper” roles for women. (Lithograph courtesy of Circus World Museum, Baraboo, Wis., with permission from Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey,® The Greatest Show on Earth,® B+B-NL-44-97-1U-2)

agent, Theodore Bower, marry her bearded successor—despite James A. Bailey's objections.¹⁵⁶ Even after her death, Jones was reportedly generous and selfless—concerned only with her husband's future happiness as she lay dying.

But burlesque lurked near the surface of the bearded lady's womanliness. While proprietors advertised hirsute women as the "genuine article," they also tickled potential audiences into coming to the sideshow to judge the authenticity of the bearded woman for themselves, by recounting stories about hirsute women whose beards had been yanked off by the doubting public. In one report, a horseman strode into a restaurant and tore off a woman's fake beard while she dined with her fellow freaks.¹⁵⁶

Newspaper commentary jokingly observed that the beard was evidence of the hirsute woman's efforts to appropriate male secondary sex characteristics—not just political equality. A Boston newspaper exclaimed, "Not content with claiming the right to vote, and laying siege to our nether garments (a la bloomer), our beards are actually in jeopardy. Heaven forefend!"¹⁵⁷ Similarly, the Italian anthropologist Cesare Lombroso argued that women were "undeveloped men" because of their small size and lack of facial hair.¹⁵⁸ In line with this sort of thought, bearded women might actually be men. Showmen were quick to tantalize the audience with the theoretical possibility that bearded women might be male. Robert Bogdan observes that in publicity photographs, bearded women were often staged with their husbands and children as a way to subvert prim conformity with gender ambiguity.¹⁵⁹

Ella Ewing, a Euroamerican "Lady Giantess," also represented a standardized "womanly womanliness," despite her towering size. Born in Gorin, Missouri, in 1872, Ewing was six feet nine inches tall when she was ten years old, and grew—reportedly—to be eight feet four inches. When Ewing was eighteen, a proprietor of a museum in Chicago wanted to hire her. Because she felt that she was the "burden of her poor father's care," Ewing accepted the showman's offer. She spent the rest of her life as a sideshow attraction, touring county fairs, the vaudeville circuit, and famous circuses under the management of her parents. She was exhibited at the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago in 1893 and traveled with Barnum & Bailey, Buffalo Bill's Wild West, and the Ringling Bros. until her death in 1913 from tuberculosis.¹⁶⁰ During the off-season, Ewing returned to Gorin, where she lived in a large, specially designed house with high ceilings. Extremely sensitive about her size, she wore multiple rings to hide her long fingers and long skirts to cover her big feet.¹⁶¹ As a testament to

Ewing's moral character, press releases emphasized her frugality, reporting that she saved \$30,000 during her career.¹⁶² Although Ewing received several offers of marriage, she dismissed them as "business propositions," designed to cash in on her celebrity. She announced flatly, "I would not live in a loveless married life. When I am in business I am in business for Ella Ewing. As for marriage, I believe my views in regard to it are the same as those of any other truly womanly woman. Wife, mother and housekeeper are the three things woman's being requires to make her life complete. God created her for that sphere. But my size will prevent me from marrying."¹⁶³

Like other white female stars, Ewing was reputed to be pious. One account spoke glowingly of her ability to "master even the most abstruse Bible questions, and to surpass even her teachers."¹⁶⁴ These images of saintly femininity were supposed to quell the freely publicized rumors that Ella was actually a monster who feasted on women and children: "But [Ewing is] a giantess fully equipped with all the modern improvements in the direction of sweetness and light and so startlingly different from the giantesses you have read about that you will have to reconstruct entirely your conception of the word? Miss Ewing never ate a baby in her life, nor transformed a princess into a calf, nor chained a lovely maiden in a dungeon. . . . On the contrary, she is a singularly lovable woman and the most popular doe in Gorin, and her home life . . . is altogether charming. . . . [She] is remarkably proficient in domestic matters, supervises the care of the house and helps with much of it."¹⁶⁵ Despite her life of public performance, constant travel, financial independence, and desire to remain unmarried, Ewing touted a life of privacy and domesticity as most appropriate for a woman.

Press agents placed physically diverse women freaks into the rubric of traditional womanhood by using the visual trappings of normality: gowns, husbands, parlors, and love of home. Proprietors' portrayals of fat women, bearded women, and lady giantesses performed two contradictory functions. Impresarios normalized physical abnormality by staging these women in normative settings. These representations also helped reify a single standard of ideal womanhood, because showmen marketed each of the women as quintessentially a "real woman" at heart. Still, proprietors used standard representations of marriage, motherhood, elaborate dress, and the parlor to poke fun at contemporary gender norms through these visibly abnormal bodies.

The snake charmer engaged in racial rather than gender disguise. Although her skin remained pale, the snake charmer manipulated her racial identity by wearing thick eye liner, lipstick, filmy, diaphanous clothing, and

of course snakes. She was staged in humorous publicity shots draped with snakes and clothed in corseted dress, but in performance she wore brief "oriental" garb with snakes slithering against her bare skin. Because animals gave an act a certain degree of sexual license, press agents described the charmer's stunts with openly suggestive language: "To see her lithe-some figure, her strong muscular arms and shapely limbs bravely caressing the huge squirming boa constrictors, never fails to produce a great impression."¹⁶⁶

In drawing audiences to the sideshow tent, circus media freely admitted that this seemingly mysterious foreigner was a "home-grown" Euroamerican woman. The racial disguise became a racial tease, the woman's "real" identity being openly masked as she slipped into the meager garb of the fictitious Other. Ida Jeffreys, a snake charmer for Barnum & Bailey's circus in 1888, was advertised as a "Hindoo" with supernatural powers, able to stun snakes with a glance. Yet a newspaper press release revealed her true identity: "Her eyes are as blue and soft as a baby's, neither does she charm [snakes] with low, soft, soothing tones on a piccolo like the Hindoo magicians you hear about, or yank them around in her herculean grasp. She is a cool-headed New York girl, Ida Jeffreys, off the stage, and she handles snakes for pay as calmly as an artist handles his brush."¹⁶⁷

At the turn of the century, virtually all snake charmers were women. As an activity that required less training than acrobatics and bareback riding, snake charming was commonly performed by managers' wives (notably Lou Ringling, known on stage as Inez Morris), who were entitled to free room and board only when they actually worked for the circus (fig. 24).¹⁶⁸ The snake charmer draped herself with a limp collection of boa constrictors and indigenous snakes which, if poisonous, had been defanged. Yet the work was dangerous at times: Lulu La Tasca, a Dutch woman who worked for Barnum & Bailey in 1891, told how she kept a sponge soaked with ether in a little oily silk-lined pocket stuffed into her corset: "When the snakes get too frisky I thrust the sponge into their eyes, and they hush up quick, I can tell you. . . . I have brads in my slippers, sharp, stout steel ones, which I stick clear into them when they don't behave. It is very, very funny to me, when I think of my smiling to the audiences as if it were real fun to charm the snakes, and all the time, I am bradding them and etherizing them and shaking in my skin for fear they will tighten their coils and be too much for me."¹⁶⁹

Despite the secret battles that the charmer waged with her snakes, she feigned great pleasure in her work. Her costuming and writhing move-



Figure 24. Lou Ringling, also known as "Inez Morris," ca. 1887 (not 1919 as written on the card). An unflappable snake charmer and equestrienne, Ringling was married to Al Ringling, director of exhibitions. (Howard Guster Collection, P-N45-RGLL-3; cabinet photograph courtesy of Circus World Museum, Baraboo, Wis.)

ments were nevertheless a far cry from those of the fully clad South Asian male snake charmers who performed their rituals on religious occasions.¹⁷⁰ Set against a backdrop of fake or painted foliage to create a fertile, tropical scene, the circus lady snake charmer was advertised as intimate friends with her “slimy pets,” sharing her home with them and even letting them sleep loose on her sofa.¹⁷¹ Damajante, a snake charmer with Barnum & Bailey in the 1880s, explained her snakes’ weekly routine in a subversion of domestic ideals: “I give [my snakes] as much attention as a mother does a child. Regularly every Saturday night they are washed in lukewarm water and wrapped up in blankets.”¹⁷²

The tattooed lady also performed a racial masquerade. Her body was colored with paisley prints, tropical scenes, flags, battle scenes, pictures of U.S. presidents, queens, and Mother Mary, and more. One tattooed woman, Lady Viola, displayed six presidents on her chest, the Capitol on her back, and, by the 1920s, ten movie actresses on her arms, and Babe Ruth, Charlie Chaplin, and Tom Mix adorning her legs and thighs.¹⁷³ A sideshow fixture from the 1880s onward, the tattooed woman performed almost naked to afford the best view of her elaborately ornamented body.¹⁷⁴ In an age of European and American imperialism, the tattooed lady carried the colorful marks of her fictional contact with faraway Pacific lands. Proprietors highlighted the fictional circumstances in which the tattooed lady became “marked,” breathlessly chronicling how she had been captured and forcibly tattooed by Native Americans or “savage” South Sea Island men. Beginning in the 1880s, Cesare Lombroso studied the purported link between tattooing, sexuality, and criminal behavior, asserting that criminals and prostitutes were much more likely to be tattooed than law-abiding folk. Proprietors diffused the tattooed woman’s potential image of criminality by promoting her as a victim of the “primitive” practices of nonwhite men at home and abroad.¹⁷⁵

With the advent of the electric inking process around 1900, procuring a tattoo became relatively easy. As a result, the market became glutted, wages fell, and tattooing lost its novelty. Showmen tried to make the act more salable by presenting tattooed families, tattooed dwarves, tattooed motorcycle riders, a congress of tattooed men, and even tattooed cows and dogs (the Tattooed Great Dane, for one), but by the early 1900s the act had become ordinary.¹⁷⁶

At some sideshows, “gentlemen only” could pay an extra twenty-five cents to stand in a small enclosed area and watch “oriental” dancing girls

perform a brief dance.¹⁷⁷ Tiny Kline, who worked as a cooch-show dancer with Arlington & Beckman’s Oklahoma Ranch Wild West in 1913, remembered vividly how the talker would attract customers with the following spiel: “Gather ’round me a little closer, men, ‘don’t want the ladies to hear this, but you are about to get a little treat inside this curtain . . . only one quarter—twenty-five cents.”¹⁷⁸ Wearing red or green tights under a brief beaded costume which hung in heavy fringes from the chest and hips—“to accentuate the movements of those parts”—Kline preceded another woman who wore a short, ruffled “oriental” dress. In her old age, Kline recalled the entire act:

The place filled up in no time; we could hear the wise-cracks and otherwise ‘smart’ remarks, from behind another curtain—our dressing-room—as they gathered in anticipation of seeing [in the talker’s words] “those muscles shake and shiver like a bowl of jelly in a gale of wind; the dance that John the Baptist lost his head over!” On a short, shrill note of the flageolet—the signal,— I came out first, climbed up to the platform which was roped off all around for protection against the impudence of the standing-audience who might make a grab at our limbs (which they sometimes tried anyway) I went into my dance, a short routine of about two minutes duration, doing high kicks and the ‘split’ which was then, considered “naughty.” There wasn’t anything in that music to inspire dance spirit within me, I could never “feel” the mood, nor figure out the timing; always against tempo, but I finished with a fast “fouetter” a twist-kick spin, and climbed down. Then came Helen, the other girl. . . . She did—what in Algiers might be considered a sedate parlor dance, but here in America they called “Hootchy-kootchy.” The most outstanding feature of it was the way she could make her head slide from side to side while looking straight at you, just like a serpent.¹⁷⁹

In 1913 one newspaper commented that the Gollmar circus cooch show was “an immoral performance, and many did not hesitate in saying that it should not have been tolerated by the authorities or those in charge of the fair grounds.”¹⁸⁰ Yet the evidence suggests that no turn-of-the-century community banned the cooch show, perhaps because its racially disguised performances gave it a certain degree of immunity against censure. Sometimes the masquerade was sexual as well: the male audience received a big surprise when the cooch dancers turned out to be a group of taunting, raucous male clowns in drag, wearing exaggerated foam breasts and buttocks

along with their usual collection of oversized shoes, noses, tiny hats, and loud, ragged clothes. The male audience, in its quest for anonymous titillation in the crowded little cooch show, was suckered.

Sideshow women of color were represented as preindustrial “primitives” and as animals. For instance, an African American girl who suffered from vitiligo, a skin disorder which causes spotting, was named “Louise the Leopard Girl.” The characters played by women of color were linked to the process of imperialism: foreign women of color were supposed to represent “newly discovered” races from newly colonized countries. The literary critic Anne McClintock suggests that “commodity spectacles” like the Crystal Palace Exhibition (1851) gave their audiences the impression that culture could be consumed at a glance, and that only western imperial powers were capable of gathering the world’s cultures under one roof neatly for systematic inspection. Like these national expositions and technologies of panoptic surveillance such as photography (which offered the promise of being the “monarch of all I survey”), circus exhibits of nonwhite women told audiences that the world was knowable through frozen images, photographic or live.¹⁸¹

Krao Farini, a Laotian woman, performed in several roles at the circus (fig. 25). She arrived in the United States as a child working as a “gorilla girl” with the John B. Doris circus in 1885; later, with the Ringling Bros. circus, she also played a “missing link” and a bearded lady. Newspaper articles and talkers recounted her anachronistic origins as a “specimen” of “ape-humanity”: Krao was allegedly “caught” in a Laotian forest at the age of seven by a Norwegian explorer, Carl Bock, who captured Krao’s father first and then Krao herself, after which her mother surrendered. When separated from their daughter, Krao’s parents reportedly cried plaintively, “Kra-o,” “Kra-o,” which became the girl’s moniker at the sideshow. After her father died of cholera and her mother was forbidden by the king to leave Laos, Krao and Bock traveled to Bangkok and then to London, where she became an exhibit for the showman G. A. Farini at the Royal Aquarium. Krao took Farini’s last name, which she kept for the rest of her life.¹⁸² Press releases reported copious testimony from scientific authorities willing to verify Krao’s authenticity as a “missing link” between apes and humankind. One such “expert,” the ethnologist A. H. Keane, described Krao in racially animated primatological language that sharply contradicted her appearance:

[Krao’s] whole body is . . . overgrown with a . . . dense coating of soft, black hair about a quarter of an inch long, but nowhere close enough



Figure 25. Krao Farini, posed against a fake jungle scene, 1885. Portrayed as a “gorilla girl” and a “missing link,” Farini, a Sumatra native who spoke seven languages fluently, made her home in Bridgeport, Connecticut, where she tutored children at the local library. (Photograph courtesy of Circus World Museum, Baraboo, Wis., SID-N45-KRAO-2)

to conceal the color of the skin, which may be described as of a dark olive-brown shade. The nose is extremely short and low, with excessively broad nostrils, merging in the full pouched cheeks, into which she appears to have the habit of stuffing her food, monkey-fashion. Like those of the anthropoids her feet are also prehensile, and the hands so flexible that they bend quite back over the wrists. The thumb also doubles completely back, and of the four fingers, all the top joints bend at pleasure independently inwards . . . the beautiful round black eyes are very large and perfectly horizontal. Hence the expression is on the whole far from unpleasing, and not nearly so ape-like as that of many Negritos.¹⁸³

At Barnum & Bailey's circus in 1903, Krao was featured next to "Johanna, the Live Gorilla." Unlike many sideshow players, Krao was not physically deformed. By juxtaposing her with the chimpanzee, proprietors invented a tradition of evolutionary continuity between the "gorilla" and the "Gorilla Girl." The copy on the back of one of Krao's postcard from 1922 described her as a "Laotian monkey girl," using language that is nearly identical to the passage quoted above: "Krao . . . has some abnormal peculiarities and some points of resemblance to certain species of the monkey tribe; the distribution of hair is one, as it grows like that of a monkey, in similar waves, that on the forearm pointing upwards from the wrist to the elbow. The fingers are very supple, being capable of being bent completely back. The cheeks are pouch-like and like monkeys."¹⁸⁴

Krao wore skimpy, ruffled costumes, and was presented against a backdrop of painted fronds as a "mysterious vestige of prehistoric humanity." Yet over time, Krao's persona changed: although still playing a "missing link," she also became known as a "civilized primitive," whose exposure to European and American civilization had "uplifted" her. She spoke seven languages fluently, and had "faultless" manners. When Barnum & Bailey wintered at Bridgeport, Connecticut, Krao volunteered as a tutor at the local library.¹⁸⁵ Throughout her career, she performed in minimal dress as an affirmation of racial "authenticity" and, not by accident, as a way to draw audiences. Popular throughout her long sideshow career, Krao earned a comfortable living, although her public persona was that of a "savage" "gorilla girl," whose "arrested" evolutionary development would forever keep her a juvenile in the public's eye. Krao, like her nonwhite colleagues, held a contradictory position at the circus: on the one hand, she was able to make a good income in a racist society where there were few lucrative employment options for a person of color. Moreover, she maintained close friendships with

sideshow players. The fat lady Carrie Holt characterized Krao as "the sweetest and loveliest lady I ever met . . . a good deal more refined than most of the crowd that stares at her."¹⁸⁶ Yet Krao's job required her to perform ideologies about nonwhite savagery that circumscribed people of color in all areas of American life.

In 1894 Barnum & Bailey's new ethnological congress included entire families, echoing the Midway Plaisance at the World's Columbian Exhibition in Chicago in 1893. Barnum & Bailey's 1894 route book describes the "family style" ethnological congress as a sort of intellectual fast food allowing whole cultures to be "eaten" at a glance: "What gave the Congress an added interest was the fact that nearly all the natives were accompanied by their women, wives and families, who brought with them all the domestic utensils, used when in their native countries . . . so that a complete and comprehensive idea could easily be had at a glance of just how these people lived in their own countries."¹⁸⁷

Foreign women and children played a primary role in creating an authentic domestic landscape. In its formative years, a circus or museum might have hired an individual South Asian female *nautch* dancer (temple dancer). But she would have been presented next to something irrelevant, say a tiger skin, or an ossified walrus penis. By 1906 the *nautch* dancer was part of Carl Hagenbeck's Grand Triple Circus East India Exposition, which contained one hundred Hindoos, including women and children, from the "great black empire." The program stated: "They are a strange and wonderful people from any view-point;—strange in contour and character; in their dress (or lack of it). . . . Housewives will be shown at their duties, baking, cooking, washing and sewing in their own Oriental and primitive way; children will romp and indulge in their native games and play and the beautiful *nautch* girls will pose for the time being in all their bewitching and be-jeweled splendor. Competent interpreters will be in attendance at all times and there will be frequent lectures of an instructive nature."¹⁸⁸

Two common themes characterized the presentation of women from "savage" societies: sexual promiscuity and participation in physical labor. Although the photographic evidence suggests that members of the ethnological congress danced or simply sat during their act, colorful lithographs depicted women working hard. The circus's spectacular live presentations of race and female gender were already familiar to Americans steeped in nineteenth-century travel narratives. Herman Melville, for one, wrote lurid, fictionalized versions of his contact with different cultures while working on a whaling ship in the 1840s. In one such tale, *Typee: A Peep at Polynesian*

Life, Melville crafted a wild account of imprisonment and eventual escape from a cannibalistic society on Typee, an island in the Marquesan chain in the South Pacific. In this tropical, mountainous setting, flirtatious, topless women, "fancifully decorated with flowers," beckoned Melville "with faces in which childish delight and curiosity were vividly portrayed. . . . But in spite of all their blandishments, my feelings of propriety were exceedingly shocked, for I could but consider them as having overstepped the due limits of female decorum."¹⁸⁹ Melville also depicted the Typees as noncultivators, living lazily in a land in which breadfruit and coconuts simply fell into one's lap.¹⁹⁰

Just as tights were a code for eroticism under the big top, lack of clothing characterized the "lady savage." Programs lured audiences, promising a scene of "wild, weird and strange picturesqueness, the bright colors of the dresses of some contrasting with the brown naked skin of their neighbors."¹⁹¹ Tropical zone players were reportedly proud of their lack of clothing. Memene, a Fiji princess "Cannibal Girl" with Barnum & Bailey's ethnological congress in 1895, pronounced American women's fashions prudish: "And the [American] dresses must cost so much money . . . why do the women wear such very big sleeves . . . it must take very much material to make them. Why do the skirts spread out so? Do American women put on so much clothes to hide their figures? Are their figures so very bad? In my country, if you have a good form, you are proud of it. You do not seek to cover it up. Yes, the dresses are very pretty, but I do not like them."¹⁹² Memene's seemingly extemporaneous commentary was simply a publicity device: by allowing a performer to speak, seemingly in her or his own voice, showmen made an act more tantalizing and attractive to potential audiences, particularly when the performer spoke candidly about public nudity and the consumption of human flesh.

In circus programs, press releases, and posters, women labored while men lolled. Such representations had a long history in American culture. In colonial Virginia, English settlers wrote that Indian women did the daily chores—gardening, food preparation, housekeeping, and childcare—while Indian men were "lazy" because they fished and hunted only occasionally.¹⁹³ Over time, this stereotype became universalized in colonial discourse, serving as a justification for imperial expansion under the guise of the "white man's burden." Cesare Lombroso argued that the "Law of Non-Labor" was the essential condition of female existence. Cynthia Russett posits that the scope of women's work was central to contemporary constructions of race and female gender: "With the possible exception of sexual laxity, female

labor represented the most striking difference in gender relations between savage societies and [the Victorians'] own. Savage women toiled; civilized women did not. It was self-evident, therefore, that the path of progress for the feminine half of humankind involved an increasing emancipation from productive labor."¹⁹⁴

In their quest to highlight the contrasts between "civilization" and "savagery," showmen showered their media with images of hard-working women of color. One headline proclaimed, "Women Are the Workers in Siam," while another argued that the equal division of labor in Papuan society proved that supporters of female equality such as Susan B. Anthony and Charlotte Perkins Gilman were wrong to postulate that labor equality among men and women was evidence of an advanced civilization. The article discussed the culture's practice of polygamy and the women's nudity, stating in a subheading that European imperialism had made native women "modest," through British enforcement of prudery: "British Influence Is Responsible for Women's Skirts Made of Palm Leaves."¹⁹⁵

At the sideshow and ethnological congress, the inversion of contemporary gender norms continued, as impresarios presented women of color as stronger, faster, and fiercer than men. To draw audiences to its revamped congress "of strange and savage people" in 1894, Barnum & Bailey held an exposition of Australian Aboriginal boomerang throwers on Manhattan Field. One woman, Tagara, was the standout, and "could throw better than any tax-paying resident on Manhattan Island."¹⁹⁶ In 1895 Barnum & Bailey exhibited female Gilbert and Fiji Islanders who "take to the water like ducks"; they were reminiscent of the sensuous women swimmers of Melville's *Typee*, swimming tirelessly to meet the whaling boats, "their jet-black tresses streaming over their shoulders, and half enveloping their otherwise naked forms."¹⁹⁷ The most extreme inversion of Euroamerican gender roles came with Barnum & Bailey's group of Dahomey women, who played "blood-thirsty Amazons": "[They] are conspicuous with their almost naked black and shiny skins and scarred breasts and faces. These are probably the only true Dahomey Amazons ever known to leave their native fastness, and are fine specimens of those Fierce and Savage Black Female Warriors that have defied the armies of civilized nations. Reared from infancy in bloody scenes of war, with every female instinct annihilated, skilled in the use of weapons, they are as Ferocious in War as Wild Beasts."¹⁹⁸

The Euroamerican female audiences who gazed at the Dahomeys perhaps felt united in their shared whiteness, despite their own ethnic differences. Vibrant circus posters depicted well-appointed Euroamerican fami-

RINGLING BROS. AND BARNUM & BAILEY

PRESENT



Figure 26. "Ubangi Savages," Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey, 1930. Ritualized disfigurement became the basis for racial novelty and spectacle at the circus in an age of radio, automobility, and the expansion of the motion picture industry. (Lithograph courtesy of Circus World Museum, Baraboo, Wis., with permission from Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey,® The Greatest Show on Earth,® RBB-NL37-30-1F-4)

lies gazing and pointing at nonwhite acts (see figs. 12 and 22). Jim Crow seating arrangements and concessions solidified the white spectators' shared privilege of witnessing together the display of what they collectively were not.¹⁹⁹ Black audiences likely shared this same sense of ethnic distance from the performers, even though they were often characterized as being of the same "race" as the players in the ring.

By the early 1930s, in an age of movies, radio, and increased magazine readership, the spectacle of seminude women of color from around the world engaged in "typical" activities had lost its novelty at the circus. To meet their audience's demand for newness, circus proprietors hired foreign women of color whose bodies had been ritually disfigured. Arriving in the United States on March 31, 1930, eight Congolese women, known as the "Ubangi Duck-Billed Savages," became an instant sensation at the Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey circus (fig. 26). Briefly clad in short, colorful

cotton skirts, the Ubangi women's principal draw was their practice (starting at the age of six) of wearing large wooden plates inside their lips, which stretched the lower lip to a diameter of over nine inches in adulthood.²⁰⁰ By 1930 the term "French Congolese" no longer sounded as mysterious as it had in an era before increasingly sophisticated mass media; consequently, the Ringling Bros. press agent, Roland Butler, further exoticized the women by coming up with the name "Ubangi" after studying maps of Africa and finding a remote district so named, hundreds of miles away from the tribe's real locale.²⁰¹ After stints at the Paris Zoo and in Rio de Janeiro, the women joined Ringling Bros.' Congress of Freaks. In addition to performing at the sideshow, the women, accompanied by their husbands, walked once around the big-top arena, each smoking a pipe and playing the drums while the bandmaster, Merle Evans, conducted modern jazz melodies which had, in his words, the "strong underlying beat of jungle rhythm."²⁰²

The presence of a sham professor who "explained" the Ubangis to American circus audiences was a critical part of the "savage" persona. The Ubangis' manager, "Professor" Eugene Bergonier (a cheat who stole their salary of \$1,500 a week²⁰³ and allowed them to keep only the proceeds from their postcard sales), spied about the origins of the lip-stretching practice: supposedly it began years ago to make Ubangi women unattractive to pirates, and over time the result became a mark of beauty.²⁰⁴

The huge lips of Ubangi women, who were presented as "monster-mouthed . . . savages . . . strangest people in all the world,"²⁰⁵ were central to the showmen's construction of their sexuality: bodily disfigurement was a means for Ubangi men to keep their women "safe" from "marauders." The women's lips also served as a metaphor for engorged labia, a visual image surely not lost on Euroamerican audiences steeped in stereotypes about black women's supposed sexual availability. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, British imperialists, in the name of scientific "objectivity," named the fictively large African labia and buttocks the "Hottentot Apron," after a Khoisan woman, Sara Bartman, who was dubbed the "Hottentot Venus." Bartman was abducted by an Englishman in South Africa and exhibited in England and France from 1810 until her death in 1815 at twenty-eight. While on stage, she was dressed in faux "native" garb composed of ostrich-shell beads and a short, tight cotton skirt to enlarge her buttocks. Curious spectators jostled and probed Bartman as she struggled to keep herself covered. After her death, a group of French scientists dissected Bartman and pickled her genitalia, which they put on exhibit at a museum in Paris. Throughout the nineteenth century and the early twentieth,

other women of color from Africa and South America were also exhibited as Hottentot Venuses.²⁰⁶

Anne McClintock suggests that Africa, the Americas, and Asia represented the “porno-tropics” for the western imagination, which reduced human beings to oversized genitalia.²⁰⁷ Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey workers remembered the Ubangi women in a similarly sexualized manner. Tom Barron, the “World’s Tallest Clown,” recalls that the Ubangis, “didn’t want to wear any clothes. . . . [T]hey had this Frenchman [Bergonier] who was sort of their ‘chief.’ He had a hell of a time trying to control them . . . every once in a while they’d take all their clothes off.”²⁰⁸ Frequently juxtaposed with “dainty” circus women and occasionally topless, the Ubangi women were marketed as the antithesis of “womanly” beauty, their nudity a signifier of racial inferiority.

During the 1930s the “Giraffe-Neck Women of Burma” also exhibited their ritually disfigured bodies at the circus (fig. 27). Performing for Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey in 1933 and for Hagenbeck-Wallace in 1934, three women demonstrated the stunning results of their cultural practice of gradually elongating their necks with heavy, solid brass coils. A \$3 program booklet,²⁰⁹ “Interesting Facts and Illustrations of the Royal Padaung Giraffe Neck-Women from Burma,” marketed the coils to American audiences as a sign of beauty and sexual attractiveness. It explained that the women’s mothers had slowly stretched their necks beginning in early childhood, adding new coils every year until each girl’s neck was approximately sixteen inches long. The women also wore coils around their legs which, combined with those around their necks, weighed between fifty and sixty pounds. The booklet noted that the women’s desirability for marriage was measured by the weight of the brass that each carried and described how American doctors got in the act of explaining what the Burmese women “had” by x-raying them to explore the physical consequences of ritualized neck stretching.²¹⁰

“The Last of the Unknown People of the Earth” were supposedly isolated relics, untouched until now by modern industrial society. Showmen reported that Mu Kaun, Mu Proa, and Mu Ba came from villages in remote, mountainous terrain several hundred miles north of Mandalay, still traveled by elephant, and spurned paper currency. The women were persuaded to travel to the United States only after Ringling agents presented their relatives with axes, knives, tins of fish, bright cloth, and silver rupees. In 1934 the Hagenbeck-Wallace program and route book contained a photograph of an elephant pulling a plow, captioned: “In the jungles in the opposite side

SAN ANTONIO
AFTERNOON & NIGHT
MON. OCT. 16
ROOSEVELT AVE. & MITCHELL ST.

Figure 27. “Giraffe-Neck Women from Burma,” Hagenbeck-Wallace, 1934. Showmen stressed that the Padaung women performed physical labor in Burma, a characteristic that defined them as “savages.” (Lithograph courtesy of Circus World Museum, Baraboo, Wis., with permission from Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey,® *The Greatest Show on Earth*,® HW-NL41-33-1U-1)

of the world, the 'two elephant' roadster is always an up-to-date model."²¹¹ Yet another photograph suggested that modern American consumer culture had already changed these women: here, all three sat in the front seat of a brand-new 1934 knee-action Pontiac that they hoped to take back to Burma.

Evoking turn-of-the-century circus constructions of gender and race, pamphlets noted that the Padaung women performed heavy labor in Burma, in spite of their fragile, weighty necks. They chopped wood, cultivated rice paddies and carried buckets of water over rough terrain. American audiences got to peek at the Padaungs' private lives by purchasing their publicity booklet, full of pictures of the women sleeping together on an American bed, playing cards, drinking tea, singing.²¹² Although the Giraffe-Neck Women, or "long necks" as their coworkers called them,²¹³ considered American women's bare necks indecent, they were provocatively presented, clothed in filmy, sarilike wraps with their shoulders exposed.²¹⁴ Irene Mann, a rope twirler who worked with the Giraffe-Neck women in 1933, remembered them sadly in 1994: "You didn't get to know them . . . [they didn't talk]. . . . That's a pretty awful thing, to bring them all the way over and put them through that. After all, they are human beings."²¹⁵

WALKING THE TIGHTROPE OF PROPRIETY

At the beginning of the twentieth century, proprietors used multiple strategies to restrict circus women's power: they marketed female seminudity and physical variability as simultaneously erotic, proper, and instructional. In many respects, they succeeded in selling the contradictions between titillation and respectability, because the circus escaped state regulation in an era when virtually all public amusements faced some form of censure from purity reformers. Progressive reformers targeted the saloon, dance hall, movie theater, skating rink, and ice-cream parlor as sites of salacious activity, where men and women mingled and prostitution might flourish. Andrea Friedman observes that in early-twentieth-century New York City, activists and government regulators attacked specific popular amusements only after they became "mass" entertainment with a heterogeneous class base. In contrast, reformers generally ignored "hard core" forms with small markets, like pornographic "french postcards."²¹⁶

At the turn of the century, antiobscenity activists rallied across the country. Mocking this wave of purity reform, *Billboard* reported—in jest—that in Pawtucket, Rhode Island, in 1898 the Young Men's Christian Associa-

tion covered "indecent" piano and chair legs with fabric.²¹⁷ From Minneapolis to Boston, diverse social reform groups, notably the Woman's Christian Temperance Union and its "Department for the Suppression of Impure Literature," the Federation of Women's Clubs, and local government officials (all characterized by *Billboard* as "prowling prudes") tried to ban the use of women wearing tights in advertising. Minnesota and Pennsylvania lawmakers introduced bills in 1890–91 to prohibit tights from being worn at public exhibitions.²¹⁸ In 1898 the Board of Aldermen in Boston ordered theatrical managers to "tone down their representations of women in tights and skirts."²¹⁹ Moreover, that same year, the Mayor of Somerville, Massachusetts, proclaimed: "I am not disposed to make any attack upon the portrayal of the nude, or partially nude human body in proper places and under suitable conditions. . . . But the highly-colored caricatures of the female body, displayed on some of the billboards of this city, they stand for nothing but obscenity and appeal only to prurient tastes."²²⁰ However, these official efforts to corral tights generally failed.

Furthermore, no state law or statute specifically addressed the conduct or dress of circus women at the turn of the century.²²¹ State agencies occasionally fined the circus for violating state child-labor laws. But the only repercussion a circus might face for its explicit bodily exhibitions was the occasional press afterblast (a critical newspaper editorial after the show's departure).²²² Individual social purity reformers also ignored the circus, even as they simultaneously regulated sexual materials and practices throughout American society. The federal Comstock Act (1873)—often personally enforced by the prudery zealot Anthony Comstock himself—outlawed the circulation through the U.S. mail of pornography, as well as birth control information and devices. Yet Comstock did not protest the circus, even as he harassed dime-museum proprietors and vaudeville owners for their erotic content. In 1887, using his authority as a special agent of the post office, Comstock arrested the well-known New York City art dealer Alfred Knoedler for selling photographic copies of paintings of French nudes, because, according to Comstock, the photographic process had rendered the paintings more prurient.²²³ Even P. T. Barnum, whose "Greatest Show on Earth" profited from the exposed female body, indirectly participated in the purity movement. As Bridgeport's representative to the Connecticut legislature, Barnum in 1879 chaired the Joint Committee on Temperance, which approved a bill forbidding all trafficking in "obscene" literature and materials dealing with sex or reproduction, and the "use" of any drug or instrument for the purpose of preventing conception. Although

Barnum personally did not support the bill, he did not block its eventual passage, thus underscoring the circus's paradoxical connection to the world of contemporary purity reform.²²⁴

Antivice and purity reform movements focused on the relationship between "obscene" amusements and the "declining" morals of vulnerable youth. Nicola Beisel suggests that this "focus on the family" gave the purity reform movement its power among the Euroamerican middle class.²²⁵ But contemporary magazines, children's books, and newspapers depicted the circus's seminude bodies as "wholesome" fun for "children of all ages." These media presented the circus as a fanciful, adventurous part of the childhood imagination. An unidentified missionary, for example, recollected that as a child around 1900, she had three career ambitions: to become a circus performer, a missionary, or Santa Claus.²²⁶ When Ringling Bros. played an extended run at Chicago in 1901, the pastor at the nearby Grace Episcopal Church, the Reverend Ernest M. Stiles, had only one objection to the circus: its planned Sunday night performance, a license for which he opposed: "Of course I could do nothing but refuse. It is one thing to be continually fighting Sunday amusements in general, which are bad enough under any circumstances; it is quite another to have the responsibility thrust upon you of having a circus at your church door. As we had no service at the church on Sunday afternoon I did not object to the circus performance at that time."²²⁷

Not only did state officials ignore the circus's spectacle of seminudity, they actually condoned it. After an inspection of the wages and working conditions of circus "girls" with the Ringling Bros. circus in 1914, the Factory Department of the State Department of Illinois concluded, "The girls with the circus receive higher wages, perform easier duties and enjoy more wholesome physical and moral surroundings than girls working in Chicago department stores and factories."²²⁸ Consequently, it would seem that the impresarios' elaborate sexual containment strategies were successful.

Still, audience members often rejected such claims of propriety. Some spectators interpreted circus women's scant dress as a sign of sexual availability. Circus workers frequently recorded instances of voyeurism on the show grounds. Harry Webb, a rider with Buffalo Bill's Wild West in 1910, remembered an instance in which William F. Cody himself brawled with a "husky" thirty-year-old whom Cody had caught peeking through a rip in the women's dressing tent. That same season, Webb also witnessed fellow Wild West workers pummeling two war veterans who had been caught sexually assaulting a couple of female audience members.²²⁹ Al Mann recalls that townsmen—usually middle-aged men—felt that they had a right to

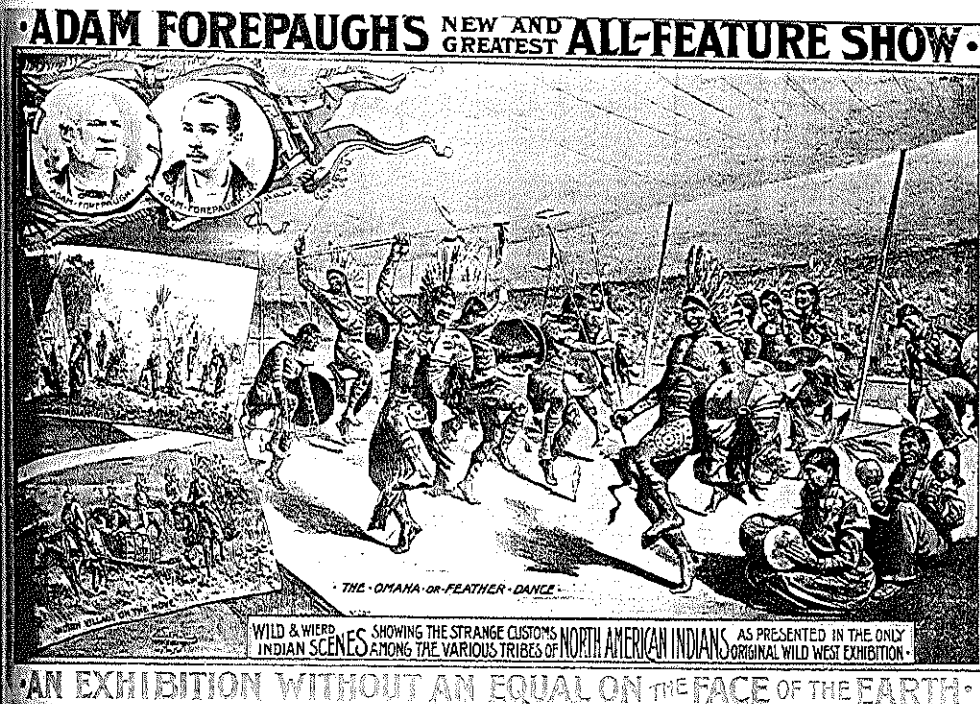


Plate 1. "Wild and Weird Indian Scenes," Adam Forepaugh Shows, 1889.

This "original Wild West exhibition" at the circus demonstrates the interconnectedness of these two amusements. (Lithograph courtesy of Circus World Museum, Baraboo, Wis., A4P-NLA-89-1F-4)

The Barnum & Bailey Greatest Show on Earth



MADAM YUCCA. THE CHAMPION AMERICAN FEMALE HERCULES. WHOSE MOST EXTRAORDINARY FEATS OF BREAKING TRIALS WITH HEAVY WEIGHTS AND PONDEROUS CANNON BALLS, CARRYING MANY MEN ALOFT AT ONE TIME AND EVEN LIFTING GIANT LIVE HORSES FROM THE GROUND. A GRACEFUL ATHLETE WITH THE MIGHT AND POWER OF SAMSON.

THE WORLD'S GRANDEST, LARGEST, BEST AMUSEMENT INSTITUTION

Plate 2. "Madam Yucca," Barnum & Bailey, 1892. Capable of lifting men, horses, and multiple cannon balls, the "champion American female Hercules" undermined notions of neurasthenic Victorian womanhood. (Lithograph courtesy of Circus World Museum, Baraboo, Wis., with permission from Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey,® The Greatest Show on Earth,® B+B-NL4-92-1F-1)

EVETTA THE ONLY LADY CLOWN
WITH BARNUM & BAILEY GREATEST SHOW ON EARTH THE



Plate 3. "Evetta the Only Lady Clown," Barnum & Bailey, 1895. Here posing in clownish, patriotic bloomers in front of an ardent admirer, the English performer Evetta Mathews was also an accomplished acrobat and contortionist. But she was best known during her year with the American circus in 1895 for her clown work in pink fleshlings. (Lithograph courtesy of Circus World Museum, Baraboo, Wis., with permission from Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey,® The Greatest Show on Earth,® B+B-NL44-95-1U-2)