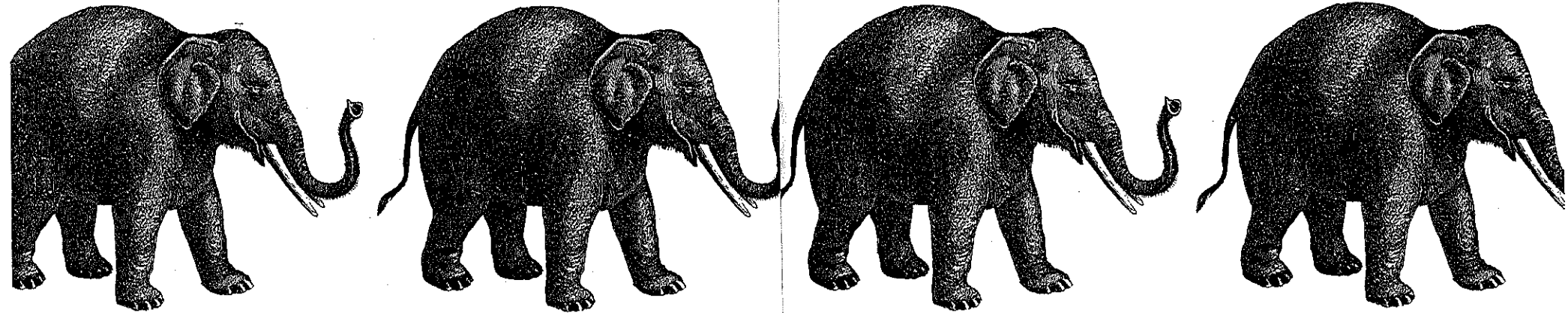
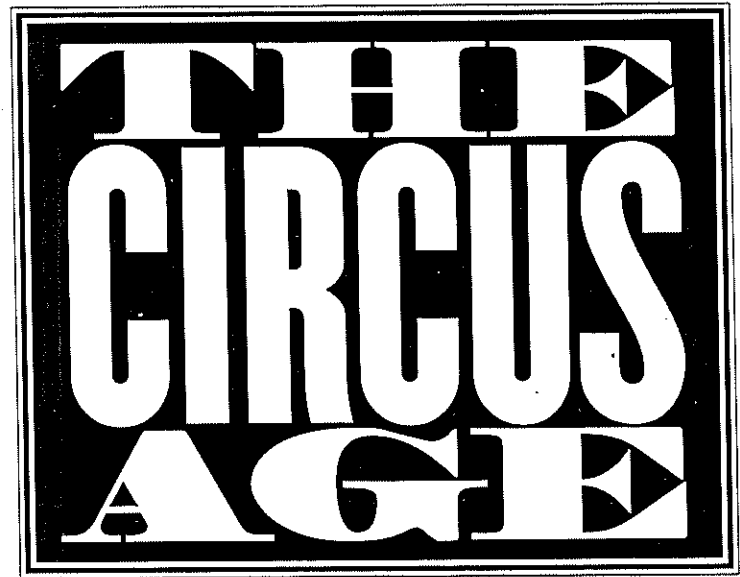


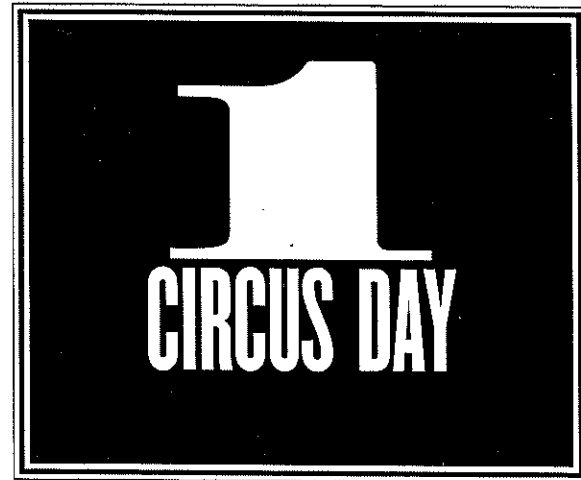
CULTURE
& SOCIETY
UNDER THE
AMERICAN
BIG TOP

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THE UNIVERSITY OF
NORTH CAROLINA PRESS
CHAPEL HILL & LONDON





On June 11, 1999, the Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey circus crept into Austin, Texas, at dusk. Arriving at a downtown rail yard on that still, sultry evening, the circus quietly conveyed its animal stock to the nearby show site without any announcement to the public, in order to avoid traffic, insurance hassles, and most important, confrontations with animal rights activists.¹ The circus had been advertised in the local newspaper and on television, but the media paid little attention to its actual presence during its two-day stint. The *Austin American-Statesman* contained only one blurb about the circus, sandwiched next to a notice about a local traffic death: "Elephant dung for the taking: Bring your own shovel and a bucket today if you want to scoop up manure from the elephants owned by the Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus."² The circus performed four times at the Erwin Center, an expansive, air-conditioned indoor arena at the University of Texas. In the blinding heat and sunshine, parents with small children streamed to the show from adjacent parking lots, grateful to enter the climate-controlled cool surrounding the circus. Meanwhile, the hustle and bustle of community life and commerce continued outside uninterrupted.

Yet a hundred years earlier, a large railroad circus shut a town down. Months before, people knew that it was coming: scores of "advance men" and billposters had already plastered all over dull barns, storefronts, and saloons thousands of vivid lithographs of wild animals and scantily clad performers emblazoned in splashes of peacock blue, orange, molten red, yellow, grass green, plum, and gold to advertise the upcoming show. In

1892 Adam Forepaugh's circus, for one, announced its impending presence in Philadelphia by mummifying an eight-story building with 4,938 lithographs, in addition to pasting thousands of other posters around the city.³ In detail, local newspapers eagerly chronicled the circus's movement, along with complete information about its arrival time.

On "Circus Day" (as it was called in newspapers, memoirs, and show programs across the nation), shops closed their doors, schools canceled classes, and factories shut down. In 1907 the Board of Education in Bridgeport, Connecticut, voted to close the schools on Circus Day, and children in Paterson, New Jersey, successfully lobbied school authorities to dismiss classes.⁴ When the Adam Forepaugh circus arrived in South Bend, Indiana, that same year, the Studebaker Wagon Works locked its doors so that its seven thousand employees could see the program.⁵ Special trains offering discounted "excursion" fares transported rural circus-goers living within a fifty-mile radius of the show grounds. Roads became thick with people, horses, and wagons. A resident of Clifton, Arizona, remembered that when Buffalo Bill's Wild West came to town in 1913, some local farmers sold part of their hay and grain supply in order to take their entire families to the show.⁶ Farmers traveled by horse and wagon twenty to forty miles and spent scant cash on novelty items like popcorn, cotton candy, and pink lemonade.⁷ Known as "rubber necks" to circus workers, rural residents craned constantly to take it all in. Sherwood Anderson was mesmerized by Circus Day as a boy in Clyde, Ohio: "When a circus came to the town where Tar [Anderson] lived he got up early and went down to the grounds and saw everything, right from the start, saw the tent go up, the animals fed, everything."⁸ In 1904 a newspaper in the mill town of Ashland, Wisconsin, near the shores of Lake Superior, noted the circus's impact: "All the roads brought in large train loads of people who came here to attend the circus and many people arrived last evening. All the mills on this side of the bay stopped work today noon and almost all business is at a standstill and everyone is taking the circus."⁹

The railroad circus overwhelmed large cities as well. When Barnum & Bailey opened its annual season in New York City in 1905, the route book reported that both the matinee and evening programs on March 24 at Madison Square Garden (where the self-styled "Greatest Show on Earth" traditionally opened each year) were "big," "packed." Many others were turned away. The next day, there was an "immense crush" at the doors when huge crowds were refused entry at the already overflowing arena.¹⁰ The Ringling Bros. circus virtually shut down New Orleans in 1898. According to the

Daily Picayune, "Last night the Ringling Bros.' Circus came near depopulating the city. It looked as if everybody had gone to the big show. If you wanted to see anybody you had only to look through the crowd, for they were all there."¹¹

On Circus Day, thousands of spectators spilled into the streets to watch the free parade (fig. 1). Barnum & Bailey's New York City parade in 1891 had 400 horses, 16 elephants, 1,000 circus performers, and copious animals from the menagerie. This living sensory mass of color, sound, and odor proceeded slowly down Fifth Avenue, weaving through congested Manhattan until it reached Madison Square Garden.¹² The scene was equally grand in provincial towns. In 1904 a filmmaker captured brief, grainy images of Barnum & Bailey's parade in Waterloo, Iowa, on celluloid: thick crowds, jiggling dromedaries, zebra herds, a forty-horse hitch, a military band, intricate, gilded "cage" wagons, each housing panting feline predators, smiling, waving women dressed in gauzy, kimono-like gowns atop the elephants, and a calliope at the rear of this moving expanse.¹³ Knowing that throngs of people watched the parade from second- and third-story windows, the John Robinson circus built fancy tin roofs on its wagons (called "coitage cages") with brightly painted designs that could be viewed from above.¹⁴

Long, winding lines at the ticket wagon greeted audience members who had not purchased their tickets in advance. Warren S. Patrick, treasurer of the Walter L. Main circus, remarked that selling 8,000 to 9,000 tickets in forty minutes (approximately 1,000 others had been sold in advance) was tough on his hands. "My mental calculation is invariably right; but now and then my fingers, after a severe strain, may drop one or two [quarters], too many or too little."¹⁵ Inside the show grounds, crowds wandered around gawking at the enormous tented city that could stretch across ten acres (fig. 2). Along the noisy midway, candy "butchers" (vendors) sold lemonade, palm frond fans, sausages, and roasted peanuts. Remembering Circus Day in his hometown of Galesburg, Illinois, Carl Sandburg vividly recalled the midway men who beckoned audiences with "oily tongue" to play games of chance for cheap prizes: "Only ten cents for a ring and the cane you ring is the cane you get."¹⁶ An hour before each big-top production, masses of people gathered at the sideshow tent lined with colorful banners depicting the Fat Lady, the Skeleton Man, the Dog-Faced Boy, and the others inside. A velvety-voiced spieler (or talker) lured patrons to part with a dime and come inside during the "blow off," a tantalizing outdoor display of seminude women flexing their muscles, a "living picture gallery" tattoo artist, or perhaps a rousing rendition of skin snapping by the Elastic Skin Man. During

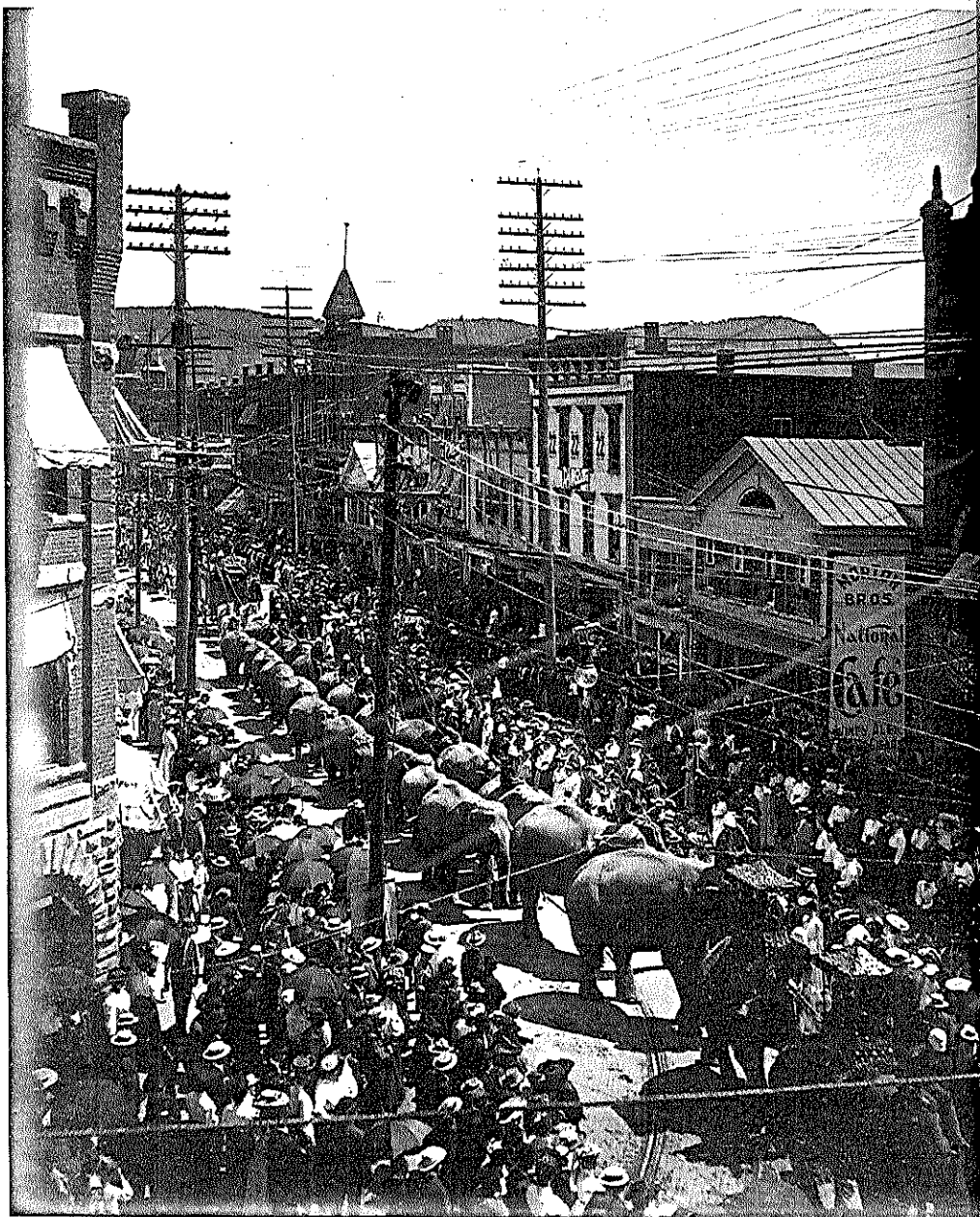


Figure 1. Ringling Bros. circus parade, Oneonta, N.Y., July 22, 1905. On "Circus Day," people took to the streets and upper-story windows to watch herds of elephants (twenty-four here) and other parts of the free parade wind ponderously through town.
(Photograph courtesy of Circus World Museum, Baraboo, Wis., RB-N81-05-35)

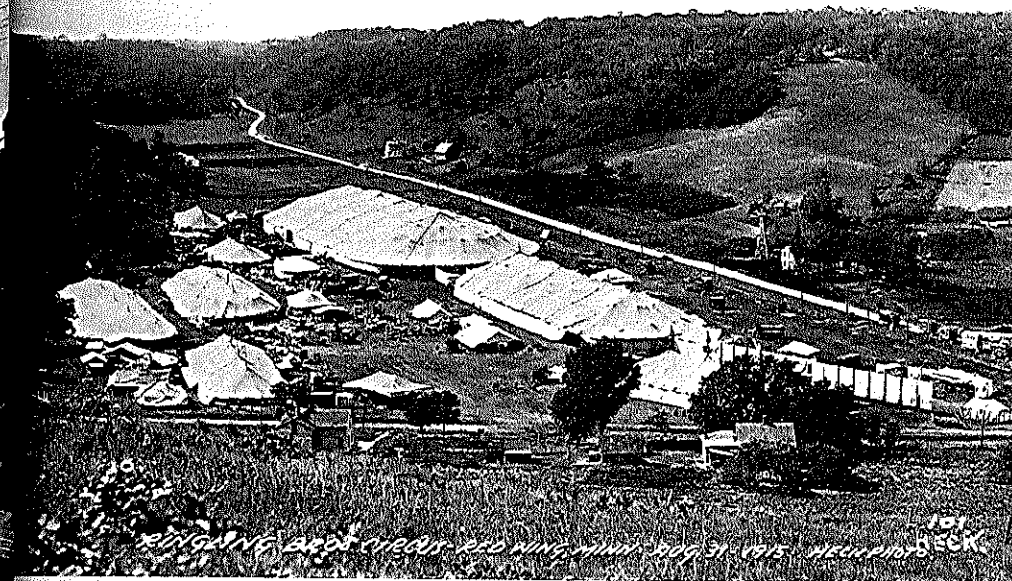


Figure 2. Hillside view of show grounds at Red Wing, Minn., Ringling Bros., 1915. Spread out across approximately ten acres, the circus was a vast, temporary canvas city.
(Photograph courtesy of Circus World Museum, Baraboo, Wis., RB-N81-15-4-1)

the "blow off," some spielers even quietly intimated that audiences *might* see nude women at the adjacent "Gentlemen Only" "cooch" show.

Once inside the menagerie tent attached to the big top, spectators saw big cats and bears lounge, eat chunks of meat, and pace in their cages, while llamas, giraffes, educated pigs, horses, chimpanzees, and peacocks fidgeted nearby. The lively strains of the brass circus band—including operatic selections, marches, and plantation melodies—told the milling audience members that it was time to head inside the big top for the main program. Candy butchers shouted and scurried around the cavernous big top, a massive canvas space propped aloft by huge poles and ropes that could hold over 10,000 people (fig. 3). A grand, paradelike entry processional of animals and performers marked the start of the main program. Approximately twenty to twenty-five other acts followed. An international constellation of players worked simultaneously on three rings and two stages. At a typical Ringling Bros. show, performers heralded from twenty-two countries, including Persia, Japan, and Italy; fifty clowns cavorted around the serious acts in vignettes of intentional chaos.¹⁷ The athletic prowess of these sleek,

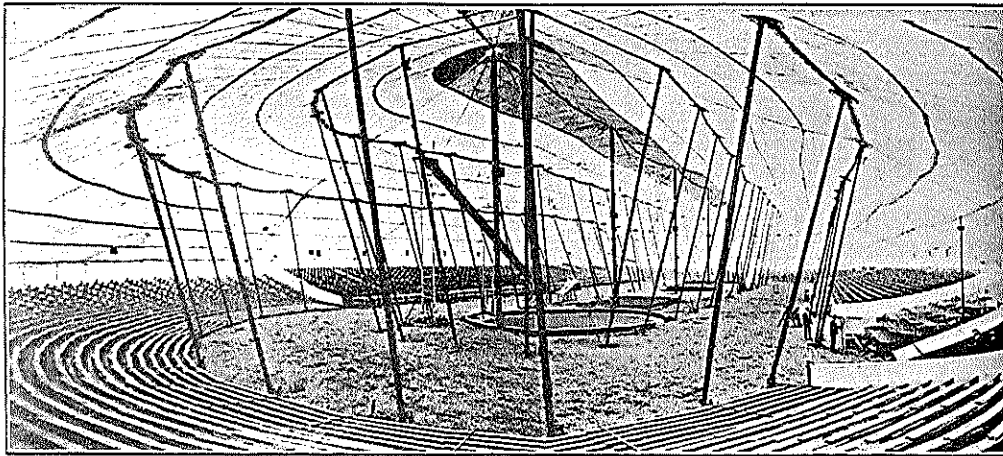


Figure 3. Barnum & Bailey, big-top interior, from advertisement in route book for tent maker, 1904. Note the presence of the sloping thrill act apparatus to the center left. Measuring approximately 200 feet wide by 460 feet long, the huge big top made its human inhabitants, shown center right, look tiny. (Interior photograph courtesy of Circus World Museum, Baraboo, Wis., B+B-N45-04-6)

muscular bodies was startling. As a boy in rural Iowa, the writer Hamlin Garland observed that “the stark majesty of the acrobats subdued us into silent worship.”¹⁸ Mark Twain’s Huck Finn echoed this sentiment as he solemnly watched big-top feats in a small Arkansas community: “It was a powerful fine sight; I never see anything so lovely . . . the men looking ever so tall and airy and straight . . . and every lady’s rose-leafy dress flapping soft and silky around her hips, and she looking like the most loveliest parasol.”¹⁹ The big-top program ended with a series of rousing horse races on the arena’s outer hippodrome track.

The mammoth circus audience was also part of the spectacle, as thousands of “strangers” from around a county streamed into town. Big cities overflowed. Provincial communities became temporary cities, complete with anonymous, pushing crowds. Fred Roys of New York compared the religious revivals of his youth to Circus Day. “Them religious revivals they used to have . . . they was great doin’s. When I was a kid we used to look forward to ’em like we did the circus. Sometimes they was as good as a circus.”²⁰ Newspapers focused on the crowd as a defining element of Circus Day. In 1890 one journalist described the “show” of nearly ten thousand people from around a county filing into Barnum & Bailey’s big top: “It was the biggest crowd of people ever in one tent in the city. A great sea of faces

stretched out in every direction, representing all of the country thirty miles around. To see so many people was the best part of the ‘performance.’”²¹ Newspapers provided detailed lists of trains bringing specific numbers of people from outlying communities to the circus.²²

Yet the sheer physical presence of a circus and its swirling masses was often bewildering. When Ringling Bros. played at Mount Pleasant, Iowa, on a steamy summer day in 1894, the huge throng became confused: “Pandemonium reigned and it seemed as if everybody was panic stricken. Families were parted, children screamingly hunted for parents, and parents distractedly hunted for children. Almost everyone was drenched to the skin and many a toilet was hopelessly ruined. Fortunately no one was hurt and the damage to the property little or nothing.”²³

Furthermore, the thousands of patrons tightly packed under the canvas tents were vulnerable in bad weather. The “blow down,” or severe storm, was common. At Adam Forepaugh’s 1893 date in Sioux Falls, South Dakota, audience members were trapped under the heavy big top after a gale force wind collapsed the tent.²⁴ That same summer, in River Falls, Wisconsin, seven people were killed after lightning struck one of the center poles at the Ringling Bros. circus.²⁵ When a windstorm “swayed and rocked” the big top at the Ringling Bros.’ stint in Sherman, Texas, in 1900, spectators were so jittery that many of the more than 10,000 there “made a wild rush to get out.”²⁶ Tornadoes, hail, wind storms, torrential rain, and knee-deep mud were some of the weather hazards that could abruptly end the program. But these attendant weather-related dangers were also part of the jarring excitement on Circus Day.

This diverse, elephantine community disruption otherwise known as Circus Day reached its peak at a turbulent historical moment. In 1903 ninety-eight circuses and menageries—the highest number in U.S. history—traveled the nation. At least thirty-eight of these rumbled by rail, and several journeyed coast to coast in a single season.²⁷ The historian Robert Wiebe characterizes this era as a time when a provincial “nation of loosely connected islands” was giving way to an anonymous, modern, urban, industrial society. Speculative investments in land and capital, the formation of large corporations, and accelerated industrialization defined the burgeoning post-Civil War economy. The proliferation of national railroad networks, the spread of the telegraph and telephone, the rise of the unscrupulous Gilded Age “robber baron,” and the stirrings of the nascent automobile industry all helped destabilize an older, provincial way of life. Consequently, Wiebe argues that a

"search for order" animated the Progressive project of corporate regulation and urban reform.²⁸

The face of the nation also changed rapidly during this era. From 1890 to 1924, about 23 million immigrants poured into the United States hoping to find prosperity in the nation's expanding industrial economy.²⁹ The federal census of 1890 declared that the frontier had officially "closed," for there was no longer a clear line between settlement and wilderness in the trans-Mississippi West. By 1920 the U.S. census revealed that 51 percent of the population lived in cities with more than 2,500 residents. In the early twentieth century, the manufacturing output of the United States now exceeded that of Great Britain, Germany, and France combined.³⁰ Some Americans, like Edward Bellamy (*Looking Backward*, 1888), held great faith in the eventual utopian promise of industrial society. Henry Ford envisioned the automobile as a democratic symbol for the "great multitude," produced by efficient, well-mannered workers on an assembly line, whose productivity and thrift would also make them good car buyers.³¹

Yet this enthusiasm was hardly universal. Sherwood Anderson despaired that industrial development was strangling the nation's spiritual life: "The land was filled with gods but they were new gods and their images, standing on every street of every town and city, were cast in iron and steel. The factory had become America's church and duplicates of it stood everywhere, on almost every street of every city belching black incense into the sky."³² While observing the New York skyline in 1904, Henry Adams noted pessimistically that New York City was becoming a powder keg of change: "The city had an air and movement of hysteria, and the citizens were crying, in every accent of anger. . . . Prosperity never before imagined, power never yet wielded by man, speed never reached by anything but a meteor, had made the world irritable nervous, querulous, unreasonable and afraid."³³

Periodic panics and depressions in 1873, 1893, and 1907 magnified this "irritable, nervous, querulous" milieu. From 1881 to 1905, approximately 7 million workers participated in 37,000 strikes to protest low wages and dangerous conditions across the nation, from Homestead, Pennsylvania (1892), to Coeur d'Alene, Idaho (1899).³⁴ In *How the Other Half Lives* (1890), Jacob Riis's stark photographs documented devastating scenes of urban poverty and grinding factory work. Scattered across the Great Plains and the South, Populists formed the People's Party in 1892, ran candidates for national office, and lobbied for federal price supports, standardized shipping charges, and the free coinage of silver as a way to protect the small farmer gouged by railroad companies and grain elevator operators favoring

corporate agricultural producers. Even seven years after the Panic of 1893 amid relative prosperity, national unemployment levels stood at a sobering 12 percent.³⁵

At the turn of the century, five transcontinental railroads now crisscrossed the country; mass-produced "safety" bicycles were omnipresent, and crawling gasoline-powered cars dotted the nation; electric street cars changed their way through congested cities, newly illuminated with glowing electric lights.³⁶ (In Cleveland in 1886, the circus owner Walter L. Main and his father were able to buy twenty horses at the rock-bottom price of \$200 for their new circus³⁷ because the city was replacing its horse-drawn streetcars with electric trolleys.)³⁸ In an era of accelerated overseas immigration and rural migration to U.S. cities, a polyglot urban culture took shape in which growing numbers of women worked outside the home and participated in a shared work and leisure culture with men.³⁹ Between 1870 and 1910 the number of women working for wages doubled from 4 to 8 million (a rise from 13 to 23 percent of the total workforce).⁴⁰ Women also entered public life through their participation in Progressive Era reform movements, which challenged nineteenth-century Victorian notions of "private" and "public" spheres. As a sign of the times, the suffrage leader Charlotte Perkins Gilman in her polemic *Women and Economics* (1898) advocated a system of state-supported childcare so that mothers could work outside the home. Some men, however, feared that the new urban industrial economy was rendering their bodies, brains, and authority useless. As an architect of a therapeutic "strenuous life," Theodore Roosevelt advocated vigorous exercise and "extreme" experiences in the wilderness.

The rise of the American overseas empire also defined this period of upheaval. The 1890s heralded the arrival of what the historian Emily Rosenberg has termed the "promotional state," when the government, in conjunction with private industry, aggressively sought new overseas markets for American surplus goods. Policymakers and business leaders viewed this "crisis of overproduction" as the cause of depression and labor strife in the 1890s and argued that new overseas markets would be a safety valve for domestic ills.⁴¹ As part of its stated mission of promoting democratic self-determination in Cuba and the Philippines, the United States vanquished the decrepit Spanish empire in the four-month Spanish-American War in 1898, thereby gaining new overseas possessions previously belonging to Spain—including Puerto Rico, Guam, the Philippines, and Cuba.

Racism, particularly in the form of social Darwinism, was an integral ideological component of empire building. The new overseas empire grew

in tandem with the rise of Jim Crow segregation, disenfranchisement, and lynching at home. Race riots charred the urban landscape in Wilmington, North Carolina, in 1898 and Atlanta in 1906, among other places. Critics of overseas expansion noted the inconsistencies of the Republican Party's position as the architect of both Reconstruction and U.S. imperialism. The *Boston Evening Transcript* observed that Southern race policy was paradoxically "now the policy of the Administration of the very party which carried the country into and through a civil war to free the slave."⁴²

Race-thinking shaped contemporary interpretations of domestic demographic trends as well. Although Euroamerican fertility rates had fallen steadily since the late eighteenth century, this demographic reality did not become a "crisis" until the turn of the century, when the flood of immigrant "others" reached record numbers. In 1901 the sociologist Edward Ross coined the term "race suicide," which quickly became a popular expression of native-born anxiety. Euroamericans often saw these newly arrived millions as fecund aliens who threatened to turn the native-born into a racial minority, potentially stripped of their political and social power.

The railroad circus provides a vivid cultural window into this era's complex and volatile web of historical changes. This book argues that the turn-of-the-century railroad circus was a powerful cultural icon of a new, modern nation-state. This vast, cosmopolitan cultural form was the product of the same economic and social forces that were transforming other areas of American life. That is to say, the railroad circus was a cultural artifact of what Alan Trachtenberg has aptly called "incorporation."⁴³ Its immensity, pervasiveness, and live immediacy transformed diversity—indeed history—into spectacle, and helped consolidate the nation's identity as a modern industrial society and world power. The railroad circus represented a "human menagerie" (a term popularized by P. T. Barnum) of racial diversity, gender difference, bodily variety, animalized human beings, and humanized animals that audiences were unlikely to see anywhere else.

But the circus's celebration of diversity was often illusionary, because the circus used normative ideologies of gender, racial hierarchy, and individual mobility to explain social transformations and human difference. At first glance, this is a problematic claim because the nomadic circus traveled on the fringes of community life—in fact, as subsequent chapters will demonstrate, its workers consciously felt that they were a breed apart from the rest of society. Indeed, performers themselves embraced cultural diversity within this international, multiracial "traveling town." Still, the circus

clearly promulgated the major social currents of the day. As the semiotician Paul Bouissac has written: "[The circus] is a kind of mirror in which the culture is reflected, condensed and at the same time transcended; perhaps the circus seems to stand outside the culture only because it is at its very center."⁴⁴

This book will focus on the largest railroad circuses because these speedy, if ungainly, three-ring shows had much wider cultural exposure than small, plodding, horse-drawn wagon shows. Little wagon circuses traveled regionally, primarily in rural areas, while the biggest railroad outfits (possessing over fifty railroad cars) such as Barnum & Bailey, the Ringling Bros., and Adam Forepaugh & Sells Brothers bridged rural and urban, roaring across the entire nation in a single season. These railroad circuses frequently employed over 1,000 people and hundreds of animals. This book will include railroad Wild West shows as part of its analysis of the circus because both amusements took place in an arena surrounded by an audience, were financed by the same investors (James A. Bailey, for one), had a similar division of labor, and overlapped considerably in their content at the turn of the century: some Wild West shows had a sideshow, and many circuses featured Wild West acts with "cowboys" and Native Americans (plate 1). In addition, Wild West shows had trick riding acts that strongly resembled circus stunts, and contained an international conglomeration of talent, including acrobats.

But there were important differences between the circus and Wild West shows. Unlike the circus, Wild West shows generally took place in an open air arena (usually a baseball field, a racetrack, or a driving park) because an errant spray of lead from the shooting acts could shred a circus big top. Only the grandstand was covered by canvas. And, as the historian Joy Kasson contends, William F. "Buffalo Bill" Cody was always obsessed with realism in his efforts to create an "authentic" popular portrait of the nation's frontier past and present, even though he did so through myth and melodrama.⁴⁵ Circus impresarios, on the other hand, aimed to amuse, tantalize, educate, and perplex their audiences with a jarring mix of the real—"genuine" exotic human and animal acts—and the pointedly unnatural—educated dogs, boxing elephants, or human "iron jaw" acts in which performers dangled from the heights by their teeth. Because this book is primarily concerned with the circus, its treatment of the Wild West is, by necessity, limited to the ways that Wild West shows intersect structurally and ideologically with the circus. Other scholars have given the Wild West much fuller treatment on its own terms.⁴⁶

Tracing the circus's development from its arrival in the United States in the early 1790s to its maturation in the late nineteenth century, chapter 2 will suggest that the evolution of the circus during the nineteenth century is a cultural metonym for national expansion and infrastructural development. At the height of its physical maturation at the dawn of the twentieth century, the railroad circus provides a complex case of cultural and ideological production because multiple groups participated in crafting its contradictory meanings: owners, managers, laborers, performers, animals, and audience members.

Chapter 3 demonstrates that the railroad circus's physical production processes were an important part of its cultural power. Circus exhibitions of labor—from advertising the show months in advance to the physical set-up and disassembly of the tented city—were just as potent to audiences as the incredible bodily stunts on the scripted program. The railroad circus functioned as a “traveling company town.” Its intricate social system and bonds of solidarity among circus employees enhanced the outfit's distance from the outside world. In general, workers abided by strict rules of conduct that maximized production and helped the circus adhere to tight railroad schedules, thus giving its far-flung audiences an intimate look at the logistics and ideology of the new industrial order.

Chapter 4 explores the contradictions embedded in the labor of circus women. The growing visibility of the female performer mirrored the rise of women's visibility in public life, as suffrage activists, consumers, temperance reformers, and participants in sports and leisure. Yet showmen were uneasy about the radical potential of these “New Women.” Consequently, they deployed a number of strategies to reconfigure strong Euroamerican circus women into dainty, domestic ladies, and women of color into educational artifacts. But impresarios also promoted female propriety with a wink, subtly reminding audiences that the circus was an excellent place to see seminude women.

Chapter 5 elucidates how exhibitions of male gender could both reinforce and subvert social norms. Although circus press agents advertised Euroamerican male big-top players as ideal modern men, actual performances were sites of gender play that could provide audiences with liberating alternatives to disciplined lives of manly capital accumulation. Animal acts, often scripted as male, helped define human constructions of male gender. Male audiences also engaged in transgressive masculine fanfare by using Circus Day as an opportunity for drinking and ritualized violence.

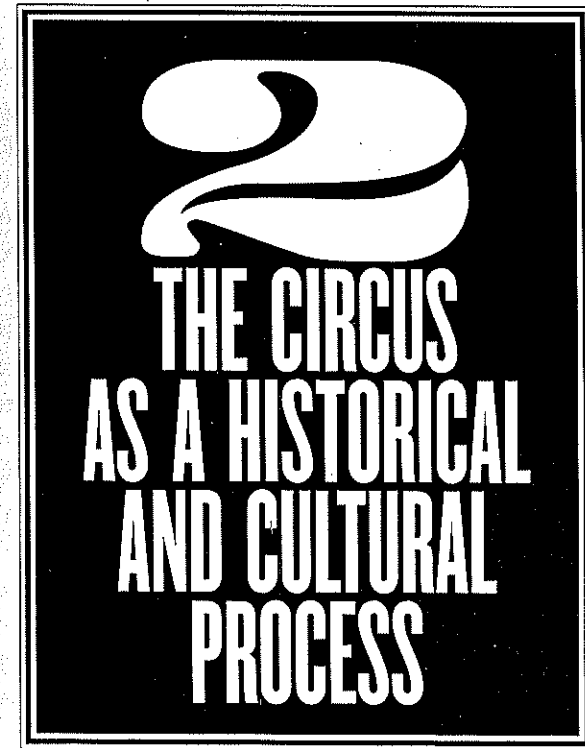
The railroad circus was at its most au courant in its celebration of America's emerging role as a global power. Chapter 6 analyzes how circus and Wild West spectacles (dramatizations of allegories, or reenactments of contemporary and historical events) helped naturalize for American consumers the entanglements of the United States in remote countries. During the Spanish-American War era, small-town newspapers breathlessly covered war, revolution, and America's military presence in faraway locales. The circus brought these distant episodes home. It also participated in foreign relations on a different plane: as an international business buying animals and hiring people from overseas. These logistics were animated by the same jingoistic *Weltanschauung* that marked the vast staged spectacles under canvas.

No other amusement saturated consumers like the circus at the turn of the century. Neither vaudeville, movies, amusement parks, nor dance halls equaled the circus's immediate physical presence—that is to say, towns did not shut down in their midst. These popular forms were integrated into local economies and local systems of surveillance, while the railroad circus was an ephemeral community ritual invading from without. Contemporary international expositions capitalized on the public's fascination with distant cultures through ethnological village displays along the midway, but one had to travel to a large city such as Chicago, Atlanta, Omaha, Buffalo, or St. Louis in order to experience a world's fair. The traveling circus, in contrast, came to one's doorstep. Disconnected from daily life, the nomadic circus had a distance from community ties that enhanced its ability to serve as a national and even international popular form, because American railroad shows traveled overseas. Adeline Blakeley, an ex-slave, identified the railroad circus as a national popular form while telling her life story to an interviewer for the Works Progress Administration's Federal Writers' Project: “I remember once Barnum & Bailey were coming to Fort Smith [Arkansas]. We were going down . . . but Bud [her employer's child] got sick and we couldn't go. When Helen [her employer at the turn of the century] and I went to California, we all saw the same circus together. . . . There we were . . . seeing the show we had planned to see way back in Arkansas.”⁴⁷

The peripatetic fin-de-siècle circus reached virtually all Americans. It educated and challenged people, irrespective of their ability to read or their distance from the metropolis. Its live visual presence made it a popular forum on science, race-thinking, gender ideologies, U.S. foreign relations, and national identity. Hamlin Garland remarked:

[The circus] was our brief season of imaginative life. In one day—in a part of one day—we gained a thousand new conceptions of the world and of human nature. It was an embodiment of all that was skillful and beautiful in manly action. It was a compendium of biologic research but more important still, it brought to our ears the latest band pieces and taught us the most popular songs. It furnished us with jokes. It relieved our dullness. It gave us something to talk about. . . . We always went home wearied with excitement, and dusty and fretful—but content. We had seen it. We had grasped as much of it as anybody and could remember it as well as the best. Next day as we resumed work in the field the memory of its splendors went with us like a golden cloud.⁴⁹

Like vaudeville, the chain store, the “cheap nickel dump,” and the amusement park, the circus helped consolidate a shared national leisure culture at the turn of the century. But in contrast to these mostly urban forms of entertainment, the circus was ubiquitous in all regions of the nation, small towns and urban centers alike: from New York City to Modesto, California, to Greenville, Texas, to New Orleans, to Butte, Montana, to Mazomanie, Wisconsin . . . and on and on. Circus Day disrupted daily life thoroughly, normalized abnormality, and destabilized the familiar right at home, day after day, town after town.



The mammoth, three-ring railroad circus rattling across America at the turn of the century was a monstrous version of its former self. A hundred years earlier U.S. circuses contained only a smattering of acrobats, clowns, and trained animals. Playing in drafty wooden arenas in population centers along the eastern seaboard, these outfits had no parade, menagerie, grand entry, spectacle, sideshow, aftershow concert, or Wild West show. For that matter, there was no circus of multi-act arena performances at all in colonial North America. Before the Revolutionary era, individual clowns, animal trainers, jugglers, and acrobats wandered from town to town, demonstrating their talents in theaters and tavern yards and on street corners. In 1774 the Continental Congress banned traveling shows (along with cockfighting and horse racing and “every species of extravagance and dissipation”) to foster republican virtue among the nascent citizenry of a nation on the verge of independence.¹ After the Revolution, these restrictions (already ignored by many citizens, especially Virginia gentlemen who loved horseracing) were

lifted at the national level. Shortly thereafter, the circus came to the United States.

Like other quintessentially "American" cultural icons such as "Yankee Doodle" and the tune for the "Star-Spangled Banner," the circus was a British import. In 1793 the English trick rider John Bill Ricketts staged the first multi-act exhibition of riders, trick horses, clowns, acrobats, jugglers, and rope walkers in a circular arena in Philadelphia. His distinguished audience included President George Washington. To the delight of his patrons, Ricketts threw an orange into the air and caught it on the tip of his sword while standing atop a galloping horse. In England, Ricketts had been a student of the retired dragoon (cavalryman) Philip Astley, who started an open-air riding school in London in 1768. Curious crowds gathered to watch these equestrian acrobatics, and the enterprising Astley began to charge admission. Ten years later, Astley created the world's first circus amphitheater near Westminster Bridge, including multi-act displays of acrobatic riding, aerial stunts, clowning, and sleight of hand.² Astley's protégé arrived in the United States in 1792 and opened a riding studio in Philadelphia, at that time the young nation's largest city. From there, Ricketts's American circus career flourished.

In its formative years in the United States, the circus did not travel great distances. At each designated site, Ricketts and his competitors constructed in advance large wooden arenas (to accommodate spectators and the forty-two-foot ring length needed for a frolicking horse and rider).³ Because construction costs were high, early circuses generally limited their tours to large urban areas—Boston, New York, and Philadelphia—where they could be guaranteed a big audience to cover building expenses. (Ricketts did venture, nonetheless, into Maine and Canada in 1797.)⁴ Most of these arenas were probably roofless, and were either sold (often as lumber) after a production had finished or used as the same site for later dates. Fire was an enormous liability that drove many circus proprietors out of business. As a result, they strictly forbade audiences to smoke at the arena.⁵ Ricketts left the U.S. circus market in 1800 to search for a more lucrative entertainment sites in the West Indies, where he was lost at sea.⁶

In the early nineteenth century people referred to the nascent circus as the "rolling show."⁷ But these circuses "rolled" ponderously by horseback, wagon, and boat because they were often mired in mud, jammed in ice, or buried in snow. In 1825 Joshua Purdy Brown (1802?–1834) of New York completely transformed the circus business when he began showing in a

canvas tent. The circus historian Stuart Thayer observes that this revolutionary development "led to the establishment of the rituals of itinerancy."⁸ Its constant movement soon made the American circus unique in comparison to its relatively settled European counterpart. Circus proprietors were no longer dependent upon urban population centers because they no longer had to invest significant capital into making the arena. Consequently, after 1825 the circus market expanded swiftly, now reaching into previously isolated rural areas. Because the canvas tent created an increasingly nomadic work environment, a more complex division of labor emerged. Circus owners now needed workers to ride ahead, so that they could advertise the upcoming production. Showmen also began to conduct a morning parade on the day of the circus to attract attention. Additional employees helped facilitate movement—hauling the tent, ring fence, and circus performers.⁹ This new labor system was a prototype for the giant railroad circuses later in the century.

Once the circus began to travel by wagon and exhibit under canvas, it merged with another popular form of public entertainment, the animal menagerie, when Joshua Purdy Brown combined the two in 1828. Circus owners were eager to join the animal menagerie business because many Protestant clergymen denounced the circus for its seminude athletes and the practice of gambling on the show grounds. Based on protests from the clergy, Vermont and Connecticut state laws banned the circus in the antebellum era.¹⁰

Colonial animal menageries provided audiences with glimpses of faraway places long before the exhibition of foreign people became a standard part of the circus. Before the advent of the exotic animal trade in the middle of the nineteenth century, speculative sea captains often purchased or traded wild animals in Africa and Asia, and sold them to fledgling U.S. menageries.¹¹ The "Lion of Barbary" (from the Barbary Coast in Africa) arrived in the British North American colonies in 1716; in 1721 came the first camel, in 1733 the first polar bear, and in 1768 the first leopard.¹² The mainstay of the circus, the elephant, first landed at New York City in 1796 on Captain Jacob Crowninshield's ship, *America*, from Bengal. The first tigers arrived from Surat, India, at Salem, Massachusetts, in 1806 on the ship *Henry*.¹³ The animal menageries were exhibited in barns, inn-yards and stables, or any other public venue where the animals could be hidden from curious, nonpaying spectators.¹⁴ The Crowninshield elephant, for one, attracted thousands of customers, including President John Adams, "to see the elephant." In fact,

“to see the elephant” soon became an important part of the American lexicon, a powerful synonym for experiencing battle used commonly during the Mexican War and the Civil War.¹⁶

The menagerie business proliferated in the nineteenth century. Although proprietors always marketed their exhibits as educational, many were hastily assembled. Henry David Thoreau visited a menagerie in Plymouth, Massachusetts, in 1851 and was frustrated that the proprietors, a “few stupid and ignorant fellows,” knew nothing about their animals: “The absurdity of importing the behemoth & then instead of somebody appearing to tell which it is—to have to while away the time—though your curiosity is growing desperate—to learn one fact about the creature—to have [Dandy] Jack [a riding monkey] and the poney introduced!!!”¹⁶ Although some menageries produced informational pamphlets on their animals as early as the 1840s, their nods to pedagogy paled next to the turn-of-the-century railroad showmen, who consistently published colorful, lavishly illustrated programs carefully describing the origins and habitat of each animal in the menagerie.

Throughout the history of the American circus, its growth was tied to the physical expansion of the nation. As the population grew, the circus moved to take advantage of new markets. Because it traveled, the circus was dependent upon internal improvements and new inventions like the steamboat and the railroad. The circus traveled through the Appalachian mountains on the Cumberland Gap Road (or National Road), topped with gravel at federal expense, after Daniel Boone marked the area in the 1790s. Even though the federal government refused to sponsor canal and road construction during the antebellum era (a precedent set in 1817 when President James Madison vetoed the internal improvements bill of Senator John C. Calhoun of South Carolina), state and local governments used public funds to build a flurry of roads and canals. With the completion in 1825 of the Erie Canal, the “big ditch” sponsored by Governor DeWitt Clinton of New York that extended for 364 miles, the circus—previously limited to eastern and southern states—now had access to the old Northwest Territories and beyond. As the populations of Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Michigan, and Wisconsin boomed after the Civil War, these states (home to fertile, inexpensive farmland and located at the crossroads of rivers, roads, and railroads) became circus centers. Wisconsin, for one, was home to Dan Castello and W. C. Coup, who were partners with P. T. Barnum in his 1871 circus debut.¹⁷ The Ringling brothers, who became the biggest circus proprietors in the nation at the turn of the century, also hailed from Wisconsin.

The steamboat also hastened the circus’s movement and growth. After Robert Fulton invented this new technology in 1807, several circuses created giant river palaces. The discordant calliope was designed to be heard along the river banks, announcing the arrival of the circus with its ghostly, fluted timbre. During the 1850s, at the height of the river boat circus’s popularity, Gilbert R. Spalding’s and Charles J. Rogers’s circus created an expansive “Floating Palace” that played dramatic spectacles like *Hamlet* and the contemporary temperance hit, *Ten Nights in a Bar Room* for over a thousand spectators at a time.¹⁸ But in the Civil War years, river boat circuses were edged out of the water by the movement of Union and Confederate troops.

Wagon circuses trod cautiously during the Civil War. Working as an apprentice for the Robinson and Lake circus in 1863, the sixteen-year-old future impresario James A. Bailey wrote in his diary about close encounters with Confederate soldiers. “Sunday, July 26, 1863: “The first place that the people commenced to make preparations to receive the Rebels was at Madison. The town was full of drinking Soldiers, we left there Saturday, and went to Versailles when we got there the Rebels were at Osgood we got away from Versailles at 7 O’Clock am and the Rebels came in at 10 O’Clock.”¹⁹

From the 1830s to the 1860s, the first railroad circuses were smaller than contemporary overland wagon shows. The railroad eventually enabled the circus to become a transcontinental entertainment, but early railroad circuses had no menagerie, sideshow, or street parade because constant rail travel was difficult and expensive: although there were 30,500 miles of track in place nationwide by 1860, railroads could not accommodate the circus’s frequent movements because the rail system was a patchwork of different track gauge and no circus had yet devised an efficient system of loading and unloading its rented system (i.e. company issue) railway cars. The circus historian Fred Dahlinger writes that from the 1850s to the 1870s, many railroad circuses were also “gilley” productions because manual laborers transported the stock from the railway depot to the grounds—a dangerous and tedious process. Some circuses stopped only at towns whose show site was right next to the railroad tracks.²⁰ Dahlinger and Thayer add that railroad travel was financially risky as well: the equipment was expensive, and all railroad-related expenses had to be paid up front. Wagon shows, by contrast, had far fewer advance expenditures—only the license and lot rental had to be paid before ticket revenues were received. The train crew itself, moreover, represented yet another expense for railroad showmen.²¹

Many audiences felt cheated by the early railroad circus and characterized it as an abbreviated amusement that still charged the same price as the bigger overland wagon show (usually twenty-five to fifty cents).²² Some circus employees, too, were resistant to this change. Jules Turnour, a clown with Ringling Bros., felt initially uncomfortable during the show's inaugural season on rails in 1890: "Somehow I didn't like the change at first. I had become so accustomed to the wagon traveling at night, to the wild, free, clean abandon of the life, that I did not fancy the idea of sleeping on a stuffy train, with smoke and cinders to bother me. . . . The wagon life may have been hard traveling, but it was in the open."²³ Yet rail travel was, on the whole, easier for circus workers, enabling them to rest more soundly between stops than in the bumpy, jarring overland wagon. In time, railroad showmen contemptuously referred to overland circuses as "mud shows."²⁴ By the 1860s greater numbers of circuses traveled at least part of the season by rail. Using eight railway cars, and moving overland part of the time, Dan Castello's Circus and Menagerie made the first transcontinental tour in American circus history in 1869. Castello's trip occurred just weeks after the California railroad magnate Leland Stanford tapped (and missed) the golden spike marking the riotous completion of the Transcontinental Railroad in May 1869 at Promontory Point, Utah.²⁵

Soon thereafter, the railroad circus flourished. Although Barnum, Coup, and Castello debuted with a wagon show in 1871, they quickly moved to the railroad in 1872. In mid-1872 Barnum and Coup solved the logistical problems of loading and unloading when they bought their own specially designed railroad cars, including flat cars, sleeping cars crammed with extra bunks, well-ventilated stock cars, and palace cars (designed with elaborate partitions and special feeding areas for valuable ring stock—animals working under the big top). Consequently, Barnum, Coup and Castello's Great Traveling World's Fair easily surpassed the biggest overland wagon shows, complete with a parade, menagerie, and sideshow. Long a fixture at Barnum's Museum in New York City (1841–68), the sideshow of "freaks" became a major attraction at Barnum's expanding railroad circus. Some long-term entertainers at the American Museum, such as William Henry Johnson, joined the Barnum, Coup and Castello sideshow. In 1872 Barnum, Coup, and Castello adopted two big-top rings to accommodate their growing audience under the increasingly crowded canvas tent. The inaugural railroad season in 1872 was a financial success, and the railroad quickly became the standard method of transport for large circuses. Just six years after

its start as a regional wagon show, Ringling Bros. became a railroad outfit in 1890, starting with eighteen cars during its inaugural season.

The railroad circus of Barnum, Coup and Castello in 1872 was a blueprint for the gargantuan railroad exhibitions at the turn of the century. But in terms of sheer size, theirs paled in comparison to later railroad circuses. When the 1872 season started (and before they purchased their own cars later in the season), Barnum and Coup used a shabby group of leased "system" cars that were twenty to thirty feet long. The combined car length was about 1,200 feet. By 1897 Barnum & Bailey's Greatest Show on Earth used its own sixty-foot cars, which totaled 3,600 feet in length.²⁶ In 1903 the Ringling Bros. had sixty-five cars.²⁷ The size of the big top tent also grew dramatically. In the 1840s the Mabie Brothers' one-ring tent measured eighty-five feet in diameter; by 1890 the Barnum & Bailey three-ring tent was approximately 460 feet long. At the turn of the century, scores of sixty-foot railway cars simultaneously carried several hundred and sometimes over a thousand circus workers, performers, animals, tents, food, and props with greater speed than over land. By 1910, when over thirty circuses traveled by rail, the Ringling Bros. show and the Barnum & Bailey circus each used eighty-four railway cars to transport their productions nationwide, and Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show traveled with fifty-nine railway cars.²⁸ Large circuses owned their railroad cars, and contracted with car makers to design palace cars and special elongated flat cars to accommodate their massive gilded wagons. Yet most railroad circuses were still small by comparison, ranging from two to twenty cars, which held dining and sleeping areas, baggage, animals, cage wagons, and seats.

Once the railroad circus expanded, its content became increasingly complex. After Barnum merged with the veteran circus owner James Bailey in 1880, the show adopted three rings the following year. In 1895 one Barnum & Bailey press release declared: "A Single Animal has Given Place to Herds and Drovers."²⁹ The enlarged, spacious big top changed the nature of circus acts, giving players more room to maneuver and consequently making stunts increasingly elaborate. Flying trapeze artists, for example, increased their troupe size and added aerial somersaults to their acts in the 1880s.³⁰ Lena Jordan is credited with executing the first successful triple somersault on the flying trapeze in 1896. In the early 1900s Ernie Clark, a member of the "Flying Clarkonians" family, awkwardly attempted the quadruple somersault in practice sessions, but consistently pulled off the triple in front of the audience.³¹

The enormous transcontinental railroad network completed after the Civil War transformed the circus into a frenetic three-ring, two-stage, cross-country extravaganza. Now able to travel on a network of uniform railroad gauge, the circus's rising ubiquity was a symbol of national expansion and consolidation during the Gilded Age. In 1892 a poster described Barnum & Bailey's spectacle "Columbus and the Discovery of America" as an inexpensive whirlwind world tour: "Special Cheap Rate Excursions from Everywhere by All Lines of Travel, Wonderland Itself Laid Bare" (fig. 4). (Of course, wonderland was laid "bare" in other ways, too, because the production boasted hundreds of barely dressed "oriental" ballet girls.) In the context of a growing leisure culture at the turn of the century, the circus advanced itself as a convenient means of taking a global tour without having to leave home. David Nasaw notes that between 1870 and 1900, real income for nonagricultural workers rose by over 50 percent; concurrently, the cost of living dropped 50 percent. Moreover, the average manufacturing worker labored three and a half hours less in 1910 than in 1890; the decline in the number of hours of the white-collar workweek was even greater.³²

The Wild West show was a product of the same technological and cultural currents that enabled the circus to expand. Colonel William F. "Buffalo Bill" Cody, a Civil War veteran, hunter, actor, businessman, and politician, created the first American Wild West show in 1883, a large railroad outfit that was able to blanket the nation by adopting the railroad circus's division of labor and mode of transportation. Buffalo Bill's Wild West had an elaborate program: cowboys, American Indians, horses, buffalo, Indian raids on settler's cabins and wagon trains, ersatz prairie fires and cyclones, bison hunts, military drills, shooting acts, races, and dramatic reenactments from the Indian Wars and of overseas battles at the turn of the century. Using the technological medium that helped hasten the frontier's actual disappearance, Cody's railroad outfit produced national narratives of "civilization," "progress," and nostalgia for preindustrial American Indian cultures and "wild" spaces, like the circus.

Although the railroad allowed the circus to travel great distances quickly and broaden its routes, it also diminished visits to the smallest rural villages that were too tiny to be profitable. Similar to their predecessors in wooden arenas, these giant railroad shows primarily played cities and towns where ticket sales could exceed their huge capital investments. Yet as noted in chapter 1, rural residents still widely attended the railroad circus, because large show owners worked with railroad companies to offer discounted "ex-

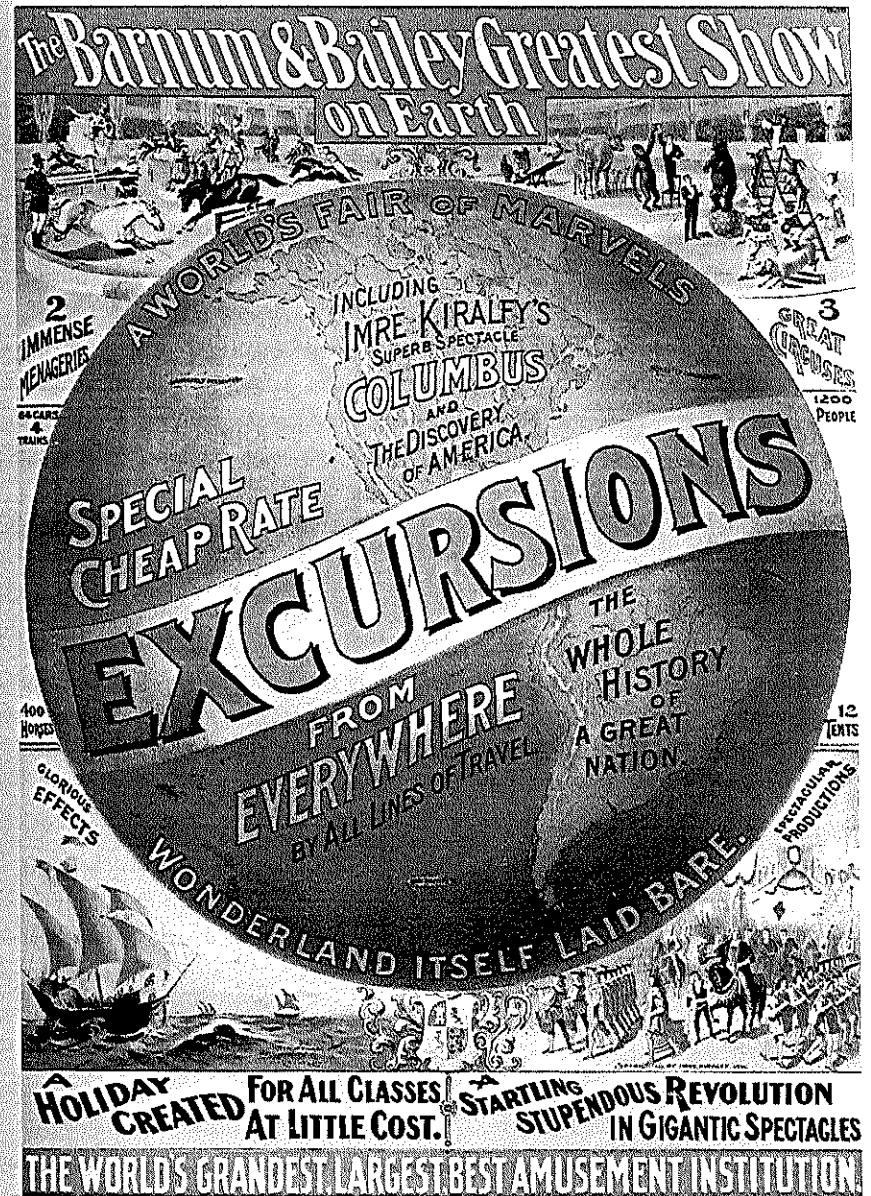


Figure 4. "Columbus and the Discovery of America," Barnum & Bailey, 1892. Featuring a cast of 1,200 people, 400 horses, and scores of other animals, this spectacle promised a quick global tour without straying far from home. (Lithograph courtesy of Circus World Museum, Baraboo, Wis., with permission from Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey,® The Greatest Show on Earth,® B+B-NL44-92-1U-1)

cursion" fares for rural residents living along railroad lines within a fifty-mile radius of a show stand. In Cuero, Texas, a local newspaper advertised the times and places in various hamlets where an excursion train (charging round-trip fares of \$1 for adults and fifty cents for children)³³ would pick up passengers for the Ringling Bros.' performance in Cuero on November 10, 1898.³⁴ In 1888 Louis E. Cooke, Barnum & Bailey's general railroad contractor and excursion agent, contracted with railroad companies for 568 excursions which brought an additional 419,026 patrons to the circus during its 192-day season.³⁵

Although the large railroad circuses covered the most territory during the season, the majority of circuses at the turn of the century were still small, "dog and pony" "mud" shows. These circuses traveled primarily by wagon and played in isolated villages. Some circus audiences became bored with these small productions, at which the now ordinary horse dominated the animal holdings. In 1899 a newspaper writer in Stoughton, Wisconsin, complained about the lack of variety at the Gollmar Brothers' recent exhibition. "To tell the truth, the show might have been better and there might have been a little more to the parade besides horses and colored wagons. . . . It was almost as much as could be expected of any twenty-five cent circus, and we can remember having seen even poorer exhibitions than the Gollmar's."³⁶

Nevertheless, others felt that the large, modern railroad productions "glutted rather than fed." William Dean Howells waxed nostalgic about his experiences at an old-fashioned dog-and-pony show in 1902, comparing it favorably to the small wagon circuses of his youth in the "old days": "I felt the old thrill of excitement, the vain hope of something preternatural and impossible. . . . There was, in fact, an air of pleasing domesticity diffused over the whole circus. This was, perhaps, partly an effect from our extreme proximity to its performances."³⁷ The modern three-ring railroad circus, by contrast, was overwhelming, "too big to see at once" with its huge canvas enclosure of rings and stages, a distinctly American cultural form whose scripted chaos and singular indigestibility departed sharply from its intimate one-ring European antecedents.

The visually oriented three-ring circus flourished in tandem with multiple visual forms at the turn of the century: department stores filled with mirrors and reflective glassy surfaces, early motion picture actualities seen at saloons, railway stations, circuses, and world's fairs, and splashy new newspaper formats with big photo-filled sports pages; the three-ring circus was symbolic of an emergent "hieroglyphic civilization" which the histo-

rian Warren Susman has characterized as "a significant break for a culture that had taken form under Bible and dictionary."³⁸ William Dean Howells thought that the modern circus was "an abuse and an outrage. . . . [The circus] has become too much of a good thing. . . . I'm still very fond of it, but I come away defeated and defrauded. . . . [I] have been given more than I was able to grasp."³⁹ Historians have concurred with this assessment. Neil Harris posits that turn-of-the-century audiences became "glutted" and reduced to "passive bedazzlement" in this overwhelming visual feast.⁴⁰ Indeed, the antebellum one-ring circus was intimate by comparison, an entertainment whose "talking clowns" and ring masters integrated witty, gossipy commentary about local politics into the program. But turn-of-the-century audiences and circus workers alike still used the colossal three-ring circus as a site for imaginative play, violence, and economic opportunity.

CULTURAL SPECTACLE

How did these multiple groups—often with conflicting interests—participate in the physical and ideological making of the railroad circus? This study treats the circus on its own terms—instead of solely symbolic terms—as a diverse conglomeration of workers and audiences who actively produced its ideological content.⁴¹ Impresarios, many of whom were McKinley Republicans supporting overseas expansion, big business, and Progressive reforms, grandly (but always with a wink) proclaimed that the circus was a magnificent exemplar of national progress. They consciously framed their exhibitions of the world with normative tropes about labor, racial inequality, separate spheres, and U.S. hegemony that often contradicted the lived experiences of the multicultural members of the traveling circus community. As a whole, the railroad circus was the product of rich members of the "culture industry," but it also was (in the words of Stuart Hall and other Marxist cultural studies theorists) "contested terrain."⁴² Scholars use this term to locate class conflict in the seemingly apolitical realm of popular culture; but one can take this oft-used phrase a step further to explore the conflicted relationship between popular culture and historical constructions of gender, race, and sexuality. With its competing visions of normality and subversion, the ubiquitous turn-of-the-twentieth-century railroad circus represents a potent case study of contradictory cultural production. (Readers who wish to avoid the following discussion on cultural theory should skip ahead to chapter 3.)

In an era of accelerated European immigration, circus acts codified eth-

nic difference as racial difference. This book uses "white" and "whiteness" with some hesitation because skin color was not unilaterally a conclusive marker of "racial" identity at the turn of the century. Ethnicity still defined one's race, be it Yankee, Italian, Irish, German, or Russian. As recent works on the historical construction of "whiteness" have suggested, white racial identity was (and still is) interconnected with the changing status of African Americans in American society and the arrival of various immigrant groups over time. Consequently, whiteness is not just about skin color but is part of a complex matrix of power relations.⁴³

Turn-of-the-century circus acts articulated the instability of white racial identity through clownish caricatures of ethnic difference. When the bagpipe player William Shearer solicited the Ringling Bros. in 1903, he stressed his ability to play ethnic stereotypes as a selling point: "I take the liberty of writing to you to ask if you can use me to play with your Circus this coming season. I am a first-rate performer on the Highland Bag Pipe. . . . I do a novelty musical act which always takes well in the Side Show. I play on an Irish potato on a common wooden potatoe masher, on a German beer steine, on a tin coffee pot and finish with a good lively Strathspey and Reel on my pipes, as well which is very unique and always pleases the audience."⁴⁴

At the same time, the circus helped consolidate a shared sense of white racial privilege among its diverse, white ethnic audiences; Euroamerican spectators came, in part, to laugh at what they ostensibly were not: pre-industrial, slow, bumbling, naive, or "savage." The circus played a double function because it codified European ethnicity as racial difference, while simultaneously promoting a uniform "white" American racial identity.

Despite the presence of oppressive racial representations, circus people—many of whom were social outsiders—often found a refuge of sorts in this nomadic community of oddballs. In fact, the circus often provided a better income than was available elsewhere. (Female stars, for one, made just as much as their male counterparts or more, and a few women, such as Mollie Bailey and Nellie Dutton, became successful circus owners. Bailey was sole owner of a small circus, "a Texas show for Texas people," at the turn of the century.)⁴⁵ Lottie Barber, a fat lady at the sideshow also known as "Jolly Dolly Dimples," remarked: "My fat is my kingdom, my riches. You can tell your thin ladies . . . that my big bulk has kept the wolf from my door for thirty-five years. I've never been broke since I struck the show business."⁴⁶ Although such commercial exhibits of physical difference may seem offensive by today's norms, Lottie Barber and her comrades at the sideshow were unfailingly pragmatic about their unusual bodily capital, viewing their

own physical limitations as an opportunity to make a living in a society that might otherwise shun them.

These nomadic circus strangers helped subvert contemporary norms about gender and the body. Dressed in sleek leotards and wearing closely cropped hair, circus men and women often looked indistinguishable from each other, particularly as they exhibited equally difficult feats of agility. Judith Butler suggests that in privileging gender as a social construction, feminist theorists have unwittingly transformed "sex" into an unchanging, indisputable material reality. Instead, Butler argues that "sex" is an unstable, discursive formation that is largely defined by rigid, heterosexual ideals.⁴⁷ With their blurring of male and female bodies, circus acts flattened sexual differences, and went so far as to challenge the distinction between human and animal. Trapeze artists and acrobats became birds and butterflies, while the "Learned Pig" solved simple math problems, and elephants, tigers, and bears danced upright. The circus encompassed an array of remarkably transgressive bodies: women grew long beards, armless ladies sewed with their feet, hairy people worked as "missing links," and midgets and giants played cowboys, royalty, and military figures.⁴⁸ Circus people also made light of the body's threshold for discomfort by engaging in seemingly agonizing activities as they swallowed swords or ate fire (both of which caused no pain if done correctly).

The railroad circus was an interactive cultural arena for workers, owners, and audiences; as such, the circus complicates scholarly ideas about representations of self and Other. On one level, the circus's spectacular pageant of the Other—a profusion of people of color working as "missing links," "savages," and "ape girls"—make it a popular counterpart to high cultural analyses like Edward Said's *Orientalism*, which use literary texts, paintings, magazines, and European travel writing to investigate how European (and American) imperialists have depicted—and dominated—the rest of the world.⁴⁹ Although extremely useful to this study, these approaches run the risk of compounding the stereotype of the Other as mute.⁵⁰ Several scholars have demonstrated that in live performance, the relationship between self and Other is constantly in flux—even when the performance reinforces racist norms—because as an entertainer, one returns the audience's gaze with one's own, thus undermining the controlling function of the gaze.⁵¹

The circus disturbed the seemingly safe staged distance between self and Other because it was interactive: the entertainer-as-Other talked back to audiences, teased them, and fooled them. Duping was a central part of the circus; consequently audiences were always vulnerable as they unwittingly

tingly became part of the "show." The Ringling Bros.' program in 1894, for instance, treated its unsuspecting audience members gathering for the big-top show to a "fight" between a foppish "city dude" and an "innocent-looking German countryman." The German became increasingly angry as the city dude strutted around trying to impress female audience members with his "eye-glass and cane, high collar and general extravagance of dress." Finally, the frightened dude charged around the hippodrome track while the German bombarded him with chunks of bread, sausage links, and a pail of beer. As the big-top program was about to start, the two retreated to the men's dressing room; only then did the audience learn that the dude and the bumpkin were "in the play."⁵²

The circus crowd itself was part of the "human menagerie" at the circus. For audience members, the presence of huge masses generated the same kind of excitement as the extraordinary human and animal athletes on the program under canvas. Emily Dickinson witnessed how Circus Day transformed ordinary neighbors into virtual strangers: "The show is not the show, / But they that go. / Menagerie to me / My neighbor be. / Fair play— / Both went to see."⁵³ Circus workers duly observed and recorded these "performances," thus making everyone part of the production. The spectacle of these crowds became especially exciting when people fought, became drunk, gambled, or panicked in the face of a storm or rampaging animal.

The giant railroad circus, then, was a dialogical cultural process because its "show" was multifaceted, a spectacular conversation of sorts between performers, workers, animals, the elements, and the audience. In analyzing the literature of François Rabelais, Mikhail Bakhtin demonstrates that carnivals, Church feasts, agricultural feasts, and civil ceremonies in early modern France were occasions for shared laughter, at which participants poked fun at authority figures and celebrated the grotesque body. These special events suspended time and dissolved social hierarchies. Bakhtin contends that the "carnival spirit" was more than a simple safety valve: "This carnival spirit offers the chance to have a new outlook on the world, to realize the relative nature of all that exists, and to enter a completely new order of things."⁵⁴ But several scholars such as Robert Allen, Terry Eagleton, Susan Davis, Peter Stallybrass, and Allon White have taken Bakhtin to task for his uniformly utopian and radical vision of the "folk." Terry Eagleton, in particular, argues that elites sanctioned carnival as a "contained popular blow-off" that unwittingly reinforced the social order.⁵⁵ Residual parts of carnival (both conservative and potentially radical) like masking, the gro-

tesque, mobbing, and theatrical inversions of social hierarchies heightened the volatile mood on Circus Day. Time was in abeyance as towns shut down. People feasted. Dressed in an array of grotesque costumes, clowns twisted their bodies and laughed at the existing order. Humans and animals aped each other, calling into question what it meant to be male, female, indeed even human.

Echoing the scenes of constant gorging at carnival captured on a Breugel canvas, Circus Day audiences spent their money freely. In Herman, Texas, for one, Miss Pauline Janes's shop offered special "Circus Day Bargains!": "Remember these prices prevail on 'circus day' only. My store is the best place from which to view the parade. Come and see me."⁵⁶ On Circus Day, the sociologist William Graham Sumner's iconic savings bank depositor was hardly the "hero of American civilization." Because consumers were wont to spend on Circus Day, many communities accused the circus of indirect thievery. Local residents complained that the nomadic circus was a "drain" on the local economy, as townspeople spent their scarce cash there instead of buying goods within the community. In 1900 the Georgia legislature virtually taxed the circus out of the state: on the grounds that it made a "big pile of money out of the community," it was required to pay from \$300 to \$1,000 a day⁵⁷ (depending on the size of the town) for the privilege of exhibiting there.⁵⁸

Although Circus Day was a carnivalesque occasion for community consolidation, it was also, paradoxically, a time of community fragmentation. Established bonds of intimacy within watchful communities temporarily dissolved into anonymity, which gave people license to engage in illicit activities. Robert Allen reminds us that "carnivals can become riots."⁵⁹ A group of boys at a circus date in Appleton, Wisconsin, in 1910, for instance, loitered, smoked cigarettes, and set five sheds on fire near the railway depot at 2 A.M. while waiting for the Ringling Bros. train to arrive.⁶⁰ Newspapers frequently published veritable catalogues of criminal activities committed while the circus was in town—who was robbed, and the value of the goods stolen. In 1905 the *Clinton (Iowa) Daily Herald* noted that Barnett's millinery lost \$25 in a robbery.⁶¹ The robbers entered through the rear door while the unwary clerks stood outside watching the free Ringling Bros. circus parade. In addition, two diamond rings were stolen at a house in nearby Sterling, Illinois. The article concluded that both crimes were "doubtless committed by some of the thieves who follow the circus about."⁶² After the Ringling Bros. circus blew through town, the *Sherman (Tex.) Weekly Democrat* reported, "It wouldn't be a complete circus day without a horse theft and

Tuesday's circus was no exception to the rule."⁶³ On the eve of Buffalo Bill's Wild West in 1898, the *Arkansas Democrat* of Little Rock cautioned local residents to "Be Careful Tomorrow: Crooks Will Abound and Stores and Dwellings Should Be Watched."⁶⁴ A newspaper in Mount Pleasant, Iowa, warned its readers to "look out for bums": "The *News* begs to inform the people that this is Circus Day, and to warn them that it would be wise to make doors and windows doubly sure. About every show, no matter how well regulated of itself, a horde of bums, thieves and confidence men have been drifting into town until now it is safe to say that fifty are in town looking for a chance to commit some depredation. At the Pork House and stock pens a crowd of them can be seen plotting together. Tonight especially should caution be observed."⁶⁵

Although large railroad circus owners hired Pinkerton detectives to maintain order on the show grounds, audiences and circus workers alike often flagrantly disregarded the presence of law enforcement. In 1908 the acrobat Aristodemo Frediani observed that Barnum & Bailey's Pinkerton detectives ignored fights, short-change "artistry," gambling, and the workingmen who sneaked under the bleachers to steal umbrellas and canes from unsuspecting audience members.⁶⁶ Community fears about crime and disorder suggest that the circus's overwhelming presence (complete with its horde of "sneak-thieves") could have solidified provincial xenophobia, especially when local newspaper articles occasionally called circus players "gypsies," a characterization that transmogrified this entire itinerant community into a liminal racial Other. But the historical evidence suggests otherwise. Virtually no town banned the circus outright at the turn of the century, whereas several states had done so in antebellum America. Residents rightly expressed their anxieties about illicit activities on Circus Day, but few (if any) moved to abolish it wholesale.

The specter of community fragmentation continued on Circus Day as audiences occasionally responded to the show's beckoning vision of a big, exciting world by "running away." The act of "running away" involved breaking away from one's community for the imagined economic opportunities and unfettered life with the circus. A manager for Buffalo Bill's Wild West wrote to a frantic sister whose brother had seemingly disappeared, to reassure her that he was alive and well and working in the dining tent.⁶⁷ From California, Gail O. Downing wrote to his pregnant wife Orilla Downing in Cody, Wyoming, about an unexpected turn of events: "I am now dropping you a little surprise. I am headed for Cheyenne Wyo. to join C. B. Irwins Wild West Show."⁶⁸ When Barnum & Bailey played at North Adams,

Massachusetts, in 1903, a local newspaper reported, "About a half a score of young men in the city who are out of employment joined the Barnum & Bailey show and will leave the city with the aggregation this evening. The men will act as canvassmen [workers who erected the canvas tents]. They are promised good wages and board, but the work is hard."⁶⁹ Because turnover rates were high among workingmen, circus managers constantly hired people throughout the season, disrupting community bonds along the way. "Running away" also represented a potential escape from the shackles of gendered and racial conformity that limited ordinary community life. Despite the lure of mobility at the circus, proprietors used these same normative stereotypes to market their shows.

The presence of the circus further assaulted community ties when children slipped away to join the show. After a Barnum & Bailey date in Lynn, Massachusetts, in 1907, the local police searched two days for two girls, thirteen-year-old Hazel Kimball and fifteen-year-old Clara Appleton, who disappeared after the circus departed. Finally, Hazel's frantic mother traveled to Salem, where she found her daughter washing dishes in the circus cook tent. Meanwhile, Clara hid under a wagon to avoid being taken home, because she wanted to become a snake charmer. The girls had joined the circus simply by hiding in a circus railroad car when the outfit departed Lynn.⁷⁰ Amid thousands of strangers, railroad cars, animals, wagons, and tents, children could easily disappear with the circus.

In this crowded, carnivalesque environment of thieves, idle teen-agers, vanishing children, and "profligate" consumers, the specter of violence was omnipresent. After the evening program had finished, drunks and "toughs" leered at disrobing female artists in the women's dressing tent and picked fights with circus workers or fellow spectators. Despite the potential leveling of social hierarchies that the circus's carnivalesque presence promised, frequent altercations on the show grounds exposed deep racial tensions. Nonetheless, several writers idealized Circus Day as a racial safety valve, a moment of unmitigated merriment for weary African American farmers in particular. The *Arkansas Democrat* reported that "cotton-hoeing and cotton-picking the year round would make life a heavy burden to the colored brother if unrelieved by the annual circus."⁷¹ Yet such tranquil characterizations belied the presence of very real racial violence—most often directed at people of color. In Cuero, Texas, the Ringling Bros. 1892 route book noted: "During a street brawl here to-day among the natives, one Mexican was stabbed to the heart, another all cut up and a white man had his ears bitten off."⁷² As various theorists, media scholars, and historians have written,

"low" groups often used carnivalesque celebrations like the circus as opportunities for "displaced abjection" to empower themselves by demonizing people even "lower" on the social hierarchy than themselves.⁷³

The potential for violence on Circus Day speaks, in part, to its overwhelming presence and its diverse audience base. As a result, the circus occupied an ambivalent position in the spectrum of turn-of-the-century popular entertainment. Wild West show, vaudeville, and other allied amusements claimed to be decorous and orderly, each quickly noting that it was "not a circus."⁷⁴ Such commentary acknowledges the circus's potentially precarious position in a broader and much debated cultural hierarchy in fin-de-siècle America.⁷⁵ But in contrast to the all-male world of burlesque and concert saloon, *everyone* went to the circus: from President Theodore Roosevelt, who received a personal invitation scrolled on satin from James A. Bailey in 1903, to hundreds of inmates from local insane asylums across the country who were brought to the circus by their wardens.⁷⁶ In many ways, the composition of the turn-of-the-century circus audience mirrored those of the mixed Jacksonian-era theater, because women, men, and children of different social class and ethnicity sat together under the same canvas big top tent. In 1898 the *Galveston Daily News* noticed the diverse crowd attending the Ringling Bros. circus: "Men, women and children from all walks of life and all avenues of trade and profession and wards and precincts were there and as one big family."⁷⁷

Yet seating arrangements at the largest railroad circuses also reflected contemporary social hierarchies based on class and race (fig. 5). Wealthy and middle-class Euroamerican spectators sat in the comfortable and expensive (usually \$1 to \$2)⁷⁸ "starbacks" or reserved box seats—the best seats in the big top, located along the center ring.⁷⁹ Depending on the show, working-class patrons paid twenty-five or fifty cents to sit at either end of the big top on unreserved bleachers (so called because of their resemblance to long bleaching boards), also known as "blues" (the practice of painting bleacher seats blue started in the mid-nineteenth century for unknown reasons).⁸⁰ Recent immigrants, Native Americans, many working-class circus-goers, and stray children paid a "blues" price to sit in the gallery or "straw house," an open "pit" area between the hippodrome track and the seating area on which straw was placed to accommodate a few thousand more spectators.

The racial geography of the circus audience reflected the proliferation of Jim Crow segregation at the turn of the century. Until 1900 southern segregation laws had applied primarily to passenger trains; thereafter, these

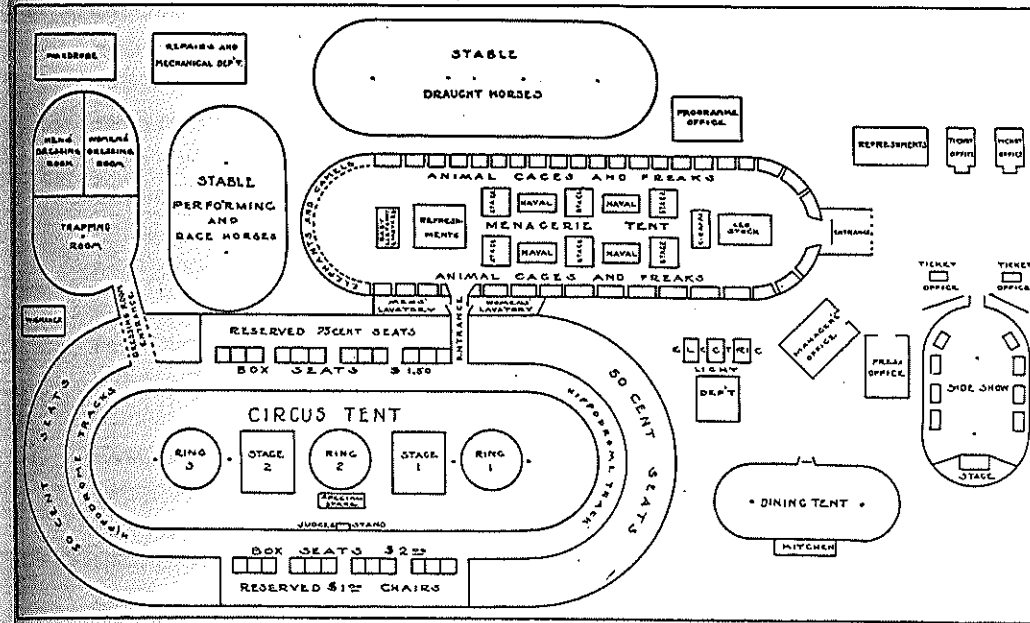


Figure 5. Barnum & Bailey program, sketch of show grounds, 1903. Although virtually everyone attended the circus, seating arrangements under the big top were generally stratified on the basis of social class and, in the Jim Crow South, uniformly racially segregated. (Interior sketch courtesy of Circus World Museum, Baraboo, Wis., B+B-N45-03-10)

laws (both de facto and de jure) extended to virtually every aspect of public life: separate toilets, water fountains, waiting rooms, orphanages, schools for the blind and deaf, Bibles for court testimony, parks, swimming pools, restaurants, streetcars, and steamboats.⁸¹ In the South, black circus-goers rode in separate "Jim Crow" railroad cars. Under the big top, black patrons generally sat segregated from other spectators in the gallery.⁸² Outside the tents, black and white audiences bought their concessions at separate snack stands. The Louisiana state legislature passed a law in 1914 mandating racially segregated entrances, exits, and ticket windows at circuses and other tent shows; the law also specified that ticket sellers remain a minimum distance of twenty-five feet from each other.⁸³ Racial segregation had a long history at the circus in the southern United States: throughout the nineteenth century, newspapers noted separate points of entry and segregated seating areas, in the pit [standing room] or gallery, for black circus audiences. Newspapers also mentioned that African Americans were supposed

to attend the circus at specified times and dates.⁸⁴ However, segregationist practices at the turn-of-the-century circus were more comprehensive than in earlier years.

The historical evidence is less clear regarding the segregation of other racial groups at the circus. Route books and press releases frequently mentioned the presence of Native American, Chicano, and Asian American audiences, but generally do not specify where they sat, only that they sat en masse.⁸⁵ One article from 1903 did note that several Chinese attending Barnum & Bailey's Madison Square Garden date paid \$1.50 for expensive box seats.⁸⁶ One spectator, Li Kung Chang, stated that he would never sit in the gallery, "where the representatives of Italy, Germany and Ireland are most prominent."⁸⁷

Ticket prices, ranging from twenty-five cents to \$2, made Circus Day a fairly expensive amusement for its day.⁸⁸ (It should be noted, however, that many dog-and-pony outfits charged only a dime for admission.)⁸⁹ Vaudeville tickets sold for a dime to a dollar, depending on the theater and the location of one's seat in the orchestra or gallery; "cheap nickel dumps" and dime museums cost what their names suggest; burlesque halls, concert saloons, and "ten-twenty-thirty" theaters, which featured "blood and thunder" melodramas, ranged in price from a dime to thirty cents.⁹⁰ Such amusements were part of a spectrum of ordinary, mostly urban leisure activities, whereas a large railroad circus or Wild West show might come to town only once or twice a year; as a result, residents could save in advance so that they might spend on Circus Day.

Like vaudeville, amusement parks, world's fairs, and the nascent movie industry, the railroad circus was an essential component of a burgeoning mass culture.⁹¹ In the new urbanizing society at the turn of the century, immigrants and the native-born from all social classes increasingly participated in shared forms of popular entertainment.⁹² David Nasaw explains that the new mass culture was "a by-product of the enormous expansion of cities."⁹³ Collectively, these popular forms helped bring about the development of twentieth-century mass culture forms like radio, television, and Disney's empire that capitalized on middle-class notions of propriety to produce virtuous entertainment for all classes. Unlike these amusements, though, the circus did not experience a development exclusively tied to the growth of cities; instead its evolution, as suggested earlier in this chapter, depended upon continental expansion and internal improvements.

The diversity of the audience at the turn-of-the-century circus was amplified by the presence of children. This development was especially striking

because the antebellum circus had been primarily an adult entertainment. In the 1880s P. T. Barnum called himself "the Children's Friend" and welcomed "children of all ages." Barnum and many social purity reformers argued that the circus offered all Americans—especially impressionable children—great moral lessons about courage, discipline, and bodily fortitude. Large railroad showmen frequently sponsored Orphans' Day productions in which local orphans were able to attend the circus free of charge. On April 12, 1894, orphanages in New York City collectively sent 4,491 children to Barnum & Bailey's circus.⁹⁴ Impresarios also sent sick children to the circus, where their health was reportedly restored: "Patients [once sick with hydrophobia] Now Cured," blared one story.⁹⁵ In 1902 the National Biscuit Company introduced Barnum's Animals, crackers encased in a vivid "take-along" package covered with pictures of animals. The popular new women's magazine *Ladies' Home Journal* (1883) had pages and pages of colorful circus cutouts for children: female bareback riders clad in tutus, bare-chested Native American men, pipe-smoking seals, floppy clowns, boxing kangaroos, erect ringmasters, educated pigs.⁹⁶

In a popular setting, the circus complemented the ideas of contemporary intellectuals like Ellen Key, John Dewey, and G. Stanley Hall, who argued that play was an important part of childhood development. Rudyard Kipling's *Jungle Book* (1894) and other children's books portrayed a child-centered world in which animals talked and children had exciting adventures in far-flung locations. Gary Cross has written that play began to replace work as a way for middle-class children to learn adult roles in an urban industrial society (where their labor was increasingly superfluous—although working-class youth still toiled to help support their families). Cross observes that in the context of a burgeoning consumer economy and changing attitudes about children's play, the toy business expanded rapidly at the turn of the century.⁹⁷ The Progressive leaders of the Playground Movement contended that the creation of urban play spaces could foster self-control through bodily conditioning.⁹⁸ In this social context, the circus ballyhooed itself as a site of uplift where children could watch superlative physical discipline in a fun setting.

The circus also inspired other aspects of the flowering children's consumer culture. Circus novels for children were common at the turn of the century, as were circus toys. Schoenhut's popular Humpty Dumpty Circus (1903) was a wooden, jointed play set of circus athletes and animals which could be twisted into myriad poses. Both toy manufacturers and circus proprietors used contemporary imperialism to create salable commodities. By

1910 the Humpty Dumpty Circus became "Humpty Dumpty in Africa," based on Theodore Roosevelt's African safari of 1909. The play set included a Roosevelt figure and a black guide, in addition to the usual stock of circus characters.⁹⁹ The modern child often first glimpsed the exotic Other through circuses and toys, a formative encounter that helped make colonial power relations part of the unconscious, "natural" world of child's play.

Many recent studies have broadened the parameters of diplomatic history to include topics like play sets and other facets of everyday life. Shaped by the new social history, itself a product of the social movements of the 1960s and early 1970s, these works consider how ordinary people (as well as elites) have participated in and shaped U.S. foreign relations. Using gender, race, and class as their analytic tools, practitioners of the new social history have demonstrated the interconnectedness of domestic culture—including sexuality, the division of labor, civil rights issues, and consumption patterns—and U.S. foreign policy.¹⁰⁰ Scholars of popular culture, influenced by the field of cultural studies and the work of Antonio Gramsci,¹⁰¹ have also located power relations outside traditional political boundaries.¹⁰² Robert Rydell, in particular, has pioneered this interdisciplinary approach by demonstrating that American international expositions at the turn of the century and in the 1930s promulgated U.S. domination overseas, Euroamerican racism, and the political and economic interests of "captains of industry." Building upon these studies, this book explores the powerful relationship between popular culture, ideology, national identity, and state formation.



When Barnum & Bailey's Greatest Show on Earth rolled into Kansas City, Missouri, in 1917, Emmett Kelly, a teen-aged industrial painter (and future hobo circus clown star) remembered the scene vividly. Transfixed by the size of the circus, Kelly counted a hundred railroad cars: "I could hardly believe the size of it. . . . The show traveled on four separate trains and looked like a big town. There was a blacksmith shop and big cook and dining tents and a barbershop tent and I could see a man delivering mail like a regular postman, and there were electric-light plants and water wagons—it was a sight I'll never forget."¹

People awoke hours before dawn to catch the first glimpse of the mile-long configuration of circus trains pulling into town (fig. 6). Carl Sandburg recalled scrambling out of bed as a boy in Galesburg, Illinois, on Circus Day: "When the circus came to town we managed to shake out of sleep at four o'clock in the morning, grab a slice of bread and butter and make a fast walk to the Q. [Chicago, Burlington and Quincy Railroad] yards to watch the unloading in early daylight."² With amazement, countless spectators watched what circus folk called "the greatest *free* show on earth." They gazed at the dazzling gilded wagons rolling smoothly off railroad flatcars; they saw elephants assisting muscular men erecting voluminous canvas tents; they smelled huge vats of coffee that would produce two thousand cups for bleary-eyed workers, and sizzling bacon, sausage, eggs, and pan-