

**"Bearded Ladies, Dainty Amazons, Hindoo Fakirs, and Lady Savages:
Circus Representations of Gender and Race in Victorian America"**

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PREFACE COMMENTS: 1) LITHOGRAPHS: Circus posters central means of advertising the show months in advance of its actual arrival. Towns saturated with these images. Plastered on storefronts, barns, saloons, businesses--in exchange for "comp" tickets.

2) CONTEXT OF THE CIRCUS'S BROADER POPULARITY AT TURN OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY: The circus representations of female gender and race that I will be discussing today come from a historical moment in Victorian America when the circus reached the zenith of its ubiquity. Ever since the English trick rider John Bill Ricketts brought specific elemental strands of circus--the coordinated acrobatic labor of people and animals in a circular arena, clowns, jugglers, and wirewalkers--the circus's growth in the New Republic was dependent on the concurrent growth of new transportation networks and technologies. Just over a decade after the completion of the nation's first transcontinental railroad in 1869, the largest circuses, like Barnum and Bailey, and the Ringling Brothers, now traveled across the entire nation by rail, hitting small towns and big cities alike while on tour. By 1900, more shows hit the roads (and rails) at the turn of the century than at any other in U.S. history.' (CIRCUS DAY IN CORSICANA, TEXAS) "Circus Day," as it was called, was an occasion when towns literally shut down to take in the sprawling, massive display of over a thousand performers, hundreds of laborers, exotic animals, gilded wagons, colorful railroad cars, and great

billowing tents. But the circus's popularity in late Victorian America was also predicated upon its ability to fulfill important cultural needs—articulating the manifold tensions, jingoism, and ambiguities of a society hurtling toward modernity. And as I will suggest today, many of those social anxieties concerned the changing place of women in public life at the turn of the twentieth century.

As a child in Princeton, Kentucky, at the turn of the twentieth century, Mabel Stark felt alienated by the watchful gender mores of small-town life. While her adolescent classmates talked constantly of marriage, she wanted nothing of the sort. Instead, she wanted to escape. She first became a nurse, but the stress of the job frayed her nerves. Eventually she suffered a nervous breakdown and "ran away" to California, where she met the showman Al Sands. In 1913, she joined the Al G. Barnes circus. (MABEL STARK) Within a few years, Mabel Stark became the most celebrated tiger trainer in the United States. According to Stark, "They may be planting violets on me tomorrow, but while I have my health and strength I'd rather take care of ten tigers than a sick person...Nerves? An animal trainer can't have nerves. I haven't had any since I gave up nursing. Every trainer is apt to waver occasionally, and when he does he gets into trouble."² Small, muscles rippling, and possessed with a body that was—in the words of a colleague—a "network of scars," the athletic performances of Mabel Stark and other circus women celebrated female power, thereby representing a startling alternative to contemporary representations of frail, neurasthenic womanhood. Indeed starting in the late 1890s, "New Woman numbers" were a frequent part of the largest circuses: women,

clad in "becoming" bloomers, "of the most trim fitting, advanced new woman dress reform pattern," played all roles in the arena: ringmaster, grooms, and object holders. Press releases declared that "No man is allowed to occupy

that sacred ground of territory..."³

Yet just fifty years earlier, the reverse was true at many shows, as no WOMAN was "allowed to occupy that sacred ground of territory" in the arena, thus making the ubiquity of these turn-of-the-century "New Women"--as acrobats, strong ladies, bareback riders, aerialists, freak show stars, and clowns--all the more striking. In 1840, for example, the Raymond, Waring and Company circus guaranteed that its show in Philadelphia would contain no women: "[T]he introduction of Females into an Equestrian Establishment is not calculated to advance [the Chestnut Street Ampitheatre's] interests, while they not unfrequently [sic] 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."⁴ Many objections to antebellum circus women centered on costuming. Although tights and leotards were not worn until after the Civil War, ante-bellum female performers wore stockings under knee length skirts--a far cry from the proper feminine attire of the period.⁵ One woman recalled that as a child in 1857, her grandmother forbade her from going 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**..."⁶ In

a society that valorized separate spheres for women and men, the muscular, scantily clad circus woman was potentially scandalous.

By the turn of the century, however, the overwhelming presence of the "half dressed," "hoop-jumping" "New Woman" at the circus reflected

a broader sea change in American culture, as the nineteenth-century Victorian ideal of separate spheres was, slowly but surely, collapsing. In the context of the expanding Gilded Age economy,

growing numbers of unmarried women entered public life as industrial workers, office and retail clerks, as school teachers and as social workers.' Characterized as a "new woman" in the popular media, middle-class Euroamerican women frequently delayed marriage in favor of seeking higher education, and economic and social independence. Institutions of higher education were fertile ground for the concurrent physical culture movement, where athletic women challenged nineteenth-century notions of fragile, sickly, neurasthenic femininity. Progressive-era reformers used physical spectacle to push for social equality. Before the Nineteenth Amendment for women's suffrage was finally ratified in 1920, female activists held street parades, open air meetings, and pickets outside the White House--tactics that did not become part of the movement until the early twentieth century.⁸ The suffragists' colorful tactics mirrored the spectacular display of the female body at the circus. Bareback rider Josie DeMott Robinson played an active role in the suffrage movement; at rallies, she posed atop her rearing horse for publicity photographs.⁹ On the Fourth of July, 1912, members of the Wisconsin Woman's Suffrage Association drove an automobile to the Ringling Brothers circus grounds in Racine, where they were well received by circus employees and spent their day distributing literature to the vast circus crowd.¹⁰ Feminist writer and activist Charlotte Perkins Gilman proudly proclaimed, "Here she comes, running, out of prison and off pedestal; chains off, crown off, halo off, just a live woman."

In the collapsible canvas world of the circus, "New Women" seemingly erased the physical boundaries between the sexes (OVERHEAD: MUSCULAR WOMAN). Women performers proudly displayed rippling, muscular bodies while demonstrating impressive feats of strength, or handling dangerous animals. Hanging forty feet in midair, aerialist Lillian Leitzel

performed a dizzying succession of 242 one-armed phlanges (one-armed rotations). (OVERHEAD--SANDWINA) In the 1910s, Barnum and Bailey press releases provided detailed muscle measurements of German weightlifter, Katie Sandwina, and declared: "She Tosses Husband about like Biscuit. Frau Sandwina is Giantess in Strength"ⁱ² (OVERHEAD: MADAME CLOFILLA, BEARDED LADY) At the circus, some women wore full, flowing beards (ELLA EWING AND GREAT PETER THE SMALL). The lady giantess, eight-foot Ella Ewing towered over her colleague, Great Peter the Small (SLOE: L'AUTO BOLIDE, THE DIP OF DEATH). From 1905 until 1909, Mauricia de Tiers and later the Rague Sisters transformed automobiles into airplanes, as they performed "new woman flips and dives" during the chilling "Dip of Death" at the Barnum and Bailey circus.

Acrobat Josephine Mathews invaded the all-male world of clowning in 1895 when she debuted with Barnum & Bailey as "Evetta, the Lady Clown" (OVERHEAD OF EVETTA THE LADY CLOWN). Dressed in traditional whiteface (which left her facial features essentially unchanged) and big, frilly bloomers, Mathews boldly sat down next to male audience members, made faces at children, and danced, tumbled and twisted "like a rubber doll" while in the arena. Press releases noted that she had "all of the new woman's fads" because she rode a bicycle, swung Indian clubs, "and does everything a man does to keep herself in proper trim."¹³ Mathews 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.¹⁴

The circus represented a safe space for many women, too. In 1906, bareback rider Josie DeMott Robinson was glad to get back to a life of vigorous athleticism and travel after sixteen years as wife and helpmate to her politician husband, Charles Robinson. Barnum and Bailey press releases portrayed Robinson's decision to return to the show as a noble act: "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... to Retrieve Losses."¹⁵ Yet, in reality, Robinson returned to the circus because she found married life as a "gillie" (circus outsider) suffocating. Through marriage and retirement, she had become, in her words, a "mummy," "choked and imprisoned by corsets and fashion."¹⁶ While away from the circus, she took up bicycling to regain her strength and to avoid the corset, but ultimately, Robinson was set free only when she left her husband and returned to her former life of equestrian acrobatics. Robinson felt that the circus was a haven: "I knew that world. I loved it, and I felt safe there."¹⁷

Circus women often found financial freedom inside their canvas world. In contrast to other lines of work, gender was typically not a limiting factor in determining salaries for the biggest circus stars. For example, bareback rider Lizzie Rooney, of the famous Riding Rooney family, made fifty dollars a week in 1906, whereas her brother Charles, also a bareback rider, but less well-known, was paid fifteen dollars per week that same year.¹⁸ But secondary female performers under the big top (i.e. ballet or chorus members) made less money than their male counterparts, earning, on average, \$7.00 a week, while men in secondary roles usually earned from ten to fifteen dollars a week.¹⁹ These figures are generally commensurate with the wages of working women in other fields.²⁰ However, the effective wages paid to female circus workers were actually much higher than those paid to women in other fields

because free room and board were included in the total compensation package at the circus.

Outside the circus, the new woman was often dismissed or branded as a danger to the social order.²¹ The scientific community often represented her as "mannish," a liminal "third sex" neither female or male.²² Critics like Theodore Roosevelt and Clark University president, G. Stanley Hall, argued that the progress of white American civilization depended, in part, upon the preservation of gender differences, and declared that women should spend their reproductive lives as wives and mothers while men should dominate public life. Theodore Roosevelt, for one, detested men and women who rejected their "proper spheres," and 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..."²³ According to this line of thought, the New woman encouraged "race suicide" because she delayed or refused motherhood in favor of higher education, paid labor and public activism."

Likewise, circus women's economic mobility, their muscularity, placelessness, scant dress and their ability to push gender boundaries, rendered them potentially subversive. Just as medical authorities and cultural critics used the label "bicycle face" to condemn the unsettling spectacle of the strong, independent female body, critics also charged that the athletic circus woman suffered from a similar

"malady": "circus face," characterized by a hard, muscular countenance, brought on by excessive athleticism under the big top.²⁵ Although clown Josephine Mathews, was a professional contortionist (in addition to her many other talents), circus owner James Bailey did not allow her to perform rigorous acrobatics as part of her act: according to Bailey, "Leave something to make the male clown's performances distinct from your own. "²⁶

In light of larger social tensions concerning the status of women at the turn of the twentieth century, showmen used a number of strategies to contain circus women—and all were founded upon contemporary notions of whiteness and domestic propriety. (OVERHEAD: SAWDUST QUEENS). With regard to Euroamerican circus women, proprietors used domestic rhetoric to temper the fact that performers publicly displayed their chiseled bodies for pay in front of huge crowds. The circus woman supposedly abhorred modern life and shunned crowded cities during the off season.²⁷ 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. According to an article in New York City's *Evening Telegram*:

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.²⁸ Hardly a woman on the loose, the big top woman remained under the protective eyes of her family community. For example, programs featuring famous elephant trainer, Lucia Zora justified her presence on the Sells-Floto Circus with her marriage to a fellow animal trainer: "The reason she is a trainer of elephants? Because she is married."²⁹

Moreover, the unmarried woman performer was reportedly on the brink of marital bliss. Days before a circus arrived, press agents like 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," or "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."³⁰

Showmen exploited the rhetoric of white domesticity even further. Circus 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."³¹ Mrs. George O. Starr, a former bareback rider and "Zazel," a cannon ball stunt artist now married to a Barnum & Bailey manager, promoted the virtuous circus woman."

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.³³

Despite showmen's pronouncements about circus women's domestic propriety, they also consciously represented these muscular Euroamerican performers as erotic. **(SLIDES: iii- WIRTH AND LEITZEL)** Wearing tights, leotards and short skirts, circus women were--by the standards of the turn of the century--nearly nude. Male performers also wore tights, but circus media generally ignored their scant clothing.

Focusing on tights, press releases described circus women in veiled, prurient terms. One headline blared "A Circus in Undress."³⁴ Another article beckoned audiences with "glimpses of white supple limbs, curving and tossing in all their natural beauty, a description of which would make Anthony Comstock fairly bilious."³⁵ In contrast to the military postures of male animal trainers, female trainers were depicted in erotic poses with their

beasts, like this 1916 poster of Mademoiselle Adgie and her lions reclining and performing the "tango"

(THE TANGO). Finally, a press release in the New York Evening Sun, noted that Evetta the Female Clown wore pink tights: "...the appearance of pink tights at such short range created almost a panic on the south side of the house."³⁶

Despite their playful, titillating marketing strategies, impresarios were often deeply ambivalent about the place of women on their shows. When showmen marketed circus women with sentimental Victorian discourses of domesticity, they did so, in part, to neutralize circus women's erotic and physically subversive presence--an impulse that led them to regulate circus women with well-publicized conduct rules that dictated women's off-duty dress, social life, and bedtime. Press releases emphasized the fact that all aspects of show life were closely controlled. "The rules of the dressing room are very strict, the women being fined \$5.00 if they are late one minute; fined if they use bad language; if a glass of wine or beer is found there, or if they step outside the door in their tights only as they go to and from their acts, or are caught flirting outside the dressing room in costume...Women of notably bad reputation will not be hired by the manager of Barnum's circus, and all in his employ are extremely well paid."³⁷ Such rules bemused Josie DeMott Robinson, who 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.³⁸

However, despite the dangers of long skirts in performance, circus lithographs commonly depicted female acrobats and riders in

long, flowing gowns and puffy, high-collared shirtwaists. (TWO SLIDES-HIGHSCHOOL RIDERS/JOIE AND JUPITER JUMPING) A few acts, such as the Meers sisters (Ouika and Mari), did perform equestrian acts in street dress: a 1896 Barnum & Bailey show program promised a performance "with grace and skill while costumed in long skirts, all the difficult feats executed by the famed male riders." (SLI/ ARRIGOSI SISTERS) A

lithograph advertising the Arrigosi Sisters, an iron jaw and trapeze act with the Forepaugh-Sells Brothers circus in 1896, showed the sisters twisting, bending, jaw-hanging, and flying through mid-air in long dresses. The caption blared: "First American Appearance of the Flying Wonders.

The Arrigosi Sisters. In Their Astonishing High Trapeze. Long Skirt Evolutions, Leaps and Dives."⁴⁰

Showmen's rhetorical containment strategies for athletic circus women involved elaborate campaigns to reify gender differences. As I have suggested, these strategies were also racial. Showmen's representations of female gender were founded upon social constructions of white Euroamerican womanhood that emphasized domesticity, modesty and timidity--even as these performers bravely lifted men and horses, or somersaulted aloft. But, showmen departed from this contradictory mode of Victorian representation when marketing female performers of color or Euroamerican women in racial disguise.

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." The former circus owner Fred Pfening, Jr., recalls that during the days of the American Circus Corporation outfits (1921-1929), circus managers used to refer to the day that ballet girls were hired as "choosing day" because owners and managers would each "choose" a ballet girl

as their companion for the season.

(BALLET GIRLS FROM COLUMBUS AND THE DISCOVERY OF AMERICA) From a Moroccan concubine in "Columbus and the Discovery of America," (1892), to 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, ersatz "oriental" costumes in order to render her into a more "authentic" Other. Owners consciously chose to costume the ballet girl in skimpy dress, despite the fact that many actual Islamic women were garbed from head to toe, in accord with the tenets of female modesty in the Shari'a (Islamic law). When planning the Ringling Bros.' 1914 spectacle, "King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba," Al and Charles Ringling recognized that the spec would be more culturally authentic if the ballet dresses were floor-length, but nevertheless agreed to shorten the dresses to the knee, because, according to Al, "...it will make the ballet look better.'" 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 racist writings of contemporary European and American theorists and novelists. Best-selling author Thomas Dixon wrote that nonwhite races were both promiscuous and violent.⁴² At the same time, African American activists, including Addie Hunton, fought against these virulent stereotypes in articles like "Negro Woman Defended."⁴³ In The Souls of Black Folk (1903), sociologist W. E. B. Du Bois undermined racist explanations of black sexual "immorality" by analyzing the structural reasons-tenancy, debt, and other forms of institutionalized racism-that forced African American women to delay marriage, and therefore, bear children out of wedlock.⁴⁴

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.⁴⁵

(COLUMBUS AND THE DISCOVERY OF AMERICA-CHEAP
EXCURSIONS...WONDERLAND LAID BARE)

In a similar spirit, Imre Kiralfy's 1892 circus spec "Columbus and the Discovery of America," a patriotic celebration of American exceptionalism and expansionism, 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 slaves are heard accompanied by the wild, weird, mysterious music of quaint instruments, and the scene gradually becomes one of splendour."⁴⁶

(UNO, SNAKE CHARMER) Similarly, the snake charmers were racially disguised. 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 clothed in corseted dress draped with snakes. But she actually performed in brief, ersatz "oriental" garb with snakes slithering against bare skin. Because animals conferred a certain degree of humorous-and therefore, safe-sexual license, press agents described the charmer's stunts with Openly suggestive language : "To see her lithesome figure, her strong muscular arms and shapely limbs bravely caressing the huge squirming boa constrictors, never fails to produce a great impression..."⁴⁷

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 in which the woman's "real" identity was 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 to be 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, [sic] neither does she charm them [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. "⁴⁸

At the turn of the century, virtually all snake charmers were women. A position that required less training than acrobatics and bareback riding, snake charming was commonly performed by managers' wives (notably Lou Ringling, aka Inez Morris on stage) who were entitled to free room and board only when they actually worked for the circus.⁴⁹ The snake charmer draped herself with a limp collection of boa constrictors and indigenous snakes which, if poisonous, had been defanged.

Sideshow women of color also were represented as preindustrial "primitives" and as animals. 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. Literary critic Anne McClintock suggests that "commodity spectacles" like the British Crystal Palace Exhibition in 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. Similar to these national expositions and technologies of panoptic ("master-of-all-I-survey") surveillance such as photography, circus exhibits of nonwhite women told audiences that the world was knowable through frozen images, photographic or live.⁵⁰

(KRAO FARINI) Krao Farini, a Laotian woman, performed in several roles at the circus. 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 as a bearded lady. Newspaper articles and talkers recounted her anachronistic origins as a "specimen" of "apehumanity": Krao was allegedly "caught" in a Laotian forest at age seven by a Norwegian explorer named Carl Bock. The explorer and captive traveled to Bangkok and then to London where Krao 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.⁵¹ 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," ethnologist A. H. Keane, described Krao in racially animated primatological language that sharply contradicted her actual 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 to conceal the color of the skin, which may be described as of a dark olive-brown shade. ...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..."⁵²

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 Krao with the chimpanzee, proprietors invented a tradition of evolutionary continuity between the ersatz gorilla and the "Gorilla Girl." 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," Krao also became known as a "civilized primitive," whose exposure to European and American civilization had "uplifted" her. Over time, she learned seven languages fluently, and had "faultless" manners. When Barnum & Bailey wintered at Bridgeport, Connecticut, Krao volunteered as a tutor at the local library.⁵³ Throughout her career, Farini 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, Farini earned a comfortable living, despite the fact that 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. 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."⁵⁴ Yet Krao's job required her to perform ideologies about nonwhite savagery that circumscribed people of color in all areas of American life.

(THREE SLID S: ETHNOLOGICAL CONGRESS—CHIKO AND JOHANNA; GIRAFFE

WITH HEAD POPPING THROUGH CAGE; "STRANGE AND SVAAGE TRIBES") In 1894, Barnum & Bailey's new ethnological congress included entire families, echoing the Midway Plaisance at Chicago's Columbia Exhibition in 1893. Barnum & Bailey's 1894 route book describes the "family style" ethnological congress as a sort of intellectual fast food in which whole cultures could be "eaten" at a glance by thousands of respectable families taking in Circus Day: "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."⁵⁵ ("ORIENTAL INDIA")

Impresarios also presented women of color to be stronger, faster and fiercer than men--both inside and outside of the ring. In 1894,

Barnum & Bailey billed a group of Dahomey women as "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 [sic] 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 [sic]."

Press releases suggested that gender equality--as manifested by men and women performing similar labor--was present only in racially "primitive" societies with pre-industrial modes of production. One circus article proclaimed, "Women are the Workers in Siam." Another argued that American feminists were wrong to demand labor equality for men and women because the only societies that contained an equal division of labor were "savage" lands like Papua New Guineas' Impresarios depicted the spectacle of bare women of color performing hard labor--i.e. lifting heavy objects among other tasks that American culture construed as "men's work"--as evidence of racial "backwardness." The Euroamerican female audiences who gazed at the Dahomeys and other women of color perhaps felt racially united in their shared whiteness, despite their own ethnic differences. Jim Crow seating arrangements and concessions solidified the shared privilege of witnessing together the display of exotic nonwhite women.

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 ritualistically disfigured.

(TWO SLIDES: UBANGIES-"FROM AFRICA'S DARKEST DEPTHS; "TRIBE OF GENUINE UBANGI SAVAGES") 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. Briefly clad in short, colorful cotton skirts, the Ubangi women's principal draw was their practice (starting at age six) of wearing large wooden plates inside their lips which stretched the lower lip to a diameter of over nine inches in adulthood.⁵⁸ By 1930, "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 Ubangi, a remote district hundreds of miles away from the tribe's real locale.⁵⁹ 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."⁶⁰

The presence of a sham professor to "explain" the Ubangis to American circus audiences was a critical part of their "savage" personas. Their manager, "Professor" Eugene Bergonier (a cheat who stole their \$1,500.00⁶¹ weekly salary and allowed them to keep only the proceeds from their postcard sales), spieled about the origins of their lip stretching practices: supposedly, years ago, the custom began in order to thwart pirates from

kidnapping the Ubangi women; by disfiguring the women, it was reasoned, the pirates would stop kidnapping them. Over time, the practice became a mark of beauty.⁶²

Presented as "monster-mouthed-savages-strangest people in all the world,"⁶³ the Ubangi women's lips 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 huge lips also served as a metaphor for engorged labia, a visual image surely not lost on Euroamerican audiences steeped in the legacies of slavery and stereotypes about black women's supposed sexual **availability**.

Using normative ideologies concerning gender, race and class, showmen successfully contained the transgressive potential of the circus woman. I say "successfully" because the circus represents one of the very few amusements in the early twentieth century that escaped censure by the purity reform movement. 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 women with the Ringling Brothers 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."⁶⁴

The ubiquitous railroad circus was a paradoxical staging ground for women performers in a society at the crossroads of Victorian and modern. Inside canvas tents, women thrilled their audiences with spectacles of female power and simultaneous titillation. Muscles rippling in androgynous leotards, circus

women leapt, rode, contorted, danced, and hung by their teeth. Indeed, the ring itself was a free space where socially constructed differences between women and men vanished--at least temporarily. Yet once outside the ring, showmen's press campaigns and conduct rules placed these placeless women back within the confines of racialized notions of female prurience and propriety. If the ability of circus women to collapse traditional gender norms at the circus reflected the rise of a popular modernism of sorts, then showmen's attempts to contain them with Victorian stereotypes represents the powerful hold that the ideology of separate spheres still maintained on American society.

These contradictions continued to linger throughout the twentieth century. (OVERHEAD: LIFE ARTICLE). On the one hand, the circus ring has remained a cultural space for gender egalitarianism. In 1947, the circus helped ease Florida State University, previously a women's college, into its new position as a coeducational institution. According to LIFE magazine: "...to speed transition from a women's into a co-ed school, the administrators began searching for an activity in which both men and women could participate. The unusual, star-spangled circus course was the answer."⁶⁵ Yet the circus also remains a site of ambivalent gender representation. Although Mabel Stark, the stoic tiger trainer who opened this talk today died at the age of seventy-nine or eighty on April 20, 1968, of a probable heart attack, she has recently come back to life in oddly prurient ways. In 2002, the Canadian writer Robert Hough published his debut novel, The Final Confessions of Mabel Stark. In this fictionalized account of Stark's life, she is eighty years old, suicidal, and on the brink of losing her job at Jungleland in Thousand Oaks, California (where she had actually worked starting in 1938). Consequently, she urgently wants to tell her life

story-warts and all-before she dies. Hough has transmogrified Stark into a titillating, taboo-breaking, tiger-loving serial divorcee who favors white suits while wrestling with her tigers-particularly Rajah, her favorite-because they hide the copious semen stains she receives during such mutually erotic performances. Soon to be released as a major motion picture starring Kate Winslet, the novel has been celebrated for its free-ranging portrait of a strong woman. However, I would argue that Hough's story with its mentally unstable, sexually depraved protagonist-more accurately reflects an enduring ambivalence toward powerful women in modern culture, for Hough's suicidal Mabel Stark is more evocative of the Victorian madwoman in the attic than the tightly knit community of tough, hardworking, and financially independent circus women from which she came.

¹ In 1903, ninety-eight circuses and menageries-the highest number in American history-traveled throughout the United States. Over thirty-eight of these shows rumbled from one destination to another by rail, and many traveled coast-to-coast in a single season Marcello Truzzi, "The Decline of the American Circus: The Shrinkage of an Institution," pp. 315, 319.

² "She Quits Nursing to Subdue Tigers," New York Times, April 2, 1922, 37

"Barnum Talks of the Shows of **His** Grandsons," unidentified newspaper clipping, 1896, LTLBBSB, TMPCC.

Unidentified newspaper advertisement for Raymond, Waring and Co., Circus, Philadelphia Chestnut Street Amphitheater, June 20, 1840, CWM. Stuart Thayer, Traveling Showmen, p. 94.

⁶ Caroline Cowles Richards quoted in *ibid*, pp. 85-86.

In 1870, sixty percent of working women were employed in domestic service; by 1900, the percentage had dropped to one-third, and by 1920, to just eighteen percent. By 1920, African-American women comprised the majority of domestic workers, because racist hiring practices virtually barred them from the industrial workplace. With the rapid expansion of the industrial sector after the Civil War, the process of mechanization deskilled many factory occupations which had been previously performed by skilled (white male) craft unionists. Employers sought young, unorganized women (nearly all AFL-affiliated unions refused membership to women) who would accept low-paying, unskilled factory jobs in the garment industry among others. John D'Emilio and Estelle Freedman, Intimate Matters, p. 189; Nancy F.

Cott, The
Grounding of Modern Feminism (New Haven and London: Yale University Press,
1987)pp. 21-23.

⁸ See Margaret Finnegan, Selling Suffrage: Consumer Culture and Votes
for Women (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999).

⁹Josie De Mott Robinson, The Circus Lady, pp. 276-277.

¹⁰ "Ringling Bros. Help Wisconsin: Wives are Members of Suffrage
Society--Allow Campaigning on Circus Grounds," Woman's Journal, July 13,
1912, citation courtesy of Susan Traverso.

¹¹Nancy Cott, The Grounding of Modern Feminism (New Haven: Yale
University Press).

¹²"She Tosses Husband about like Biscuit," unidentified newspaper
clipping, 1911, GT-2 (Barnum and Bailey) File, CWM.

¹³ "A Very New Woman," unidentified newspaper clipping, 1896, CWM.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵"From Home of Riches to the Bareback Ring," (St. Louis) *Post*, May 12, 1907,
Barnum and Bailey Press Clippings Books (BBPCB) 1906-1907, John and Mable
Ringling Museum of Art (JMRMA), Sarasota, Florida.

¹⁶Josephine Robinson, *The Circus Lady*, Robinson, New York:
Thomas Y. Crowell Co., 1925), pp. 175-178.

¹⁷ Ibid, p. 216.

¹⁸Gollmar Brothers Family Accounting Ledger, 1906, CWM.

¹⁹ This an average figure based on an overview of multiple circus contracts
from 1896 to 1915 on file at CWM.

²⁰ In New York City, for instance, fifty-six percent of female factory workers
earned less than eight dollars a week, and the majority of women working
in retail stores were paid less than seven dollars and fifty cents a week.
Kathy Peiss, *Cheap Amusements: Working Women and Leisure in
Turn-of-the-Century New York* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1986),
p. 52.

²¹Historian Carol Smith-Rosenberg identifies the New Woman as an upper or
middle class single professional white woman who chose higher education over
motherhood. I define the "New Woman" more broadly than Smith-Rosenberg to
include all women who participated in the public sphere around the turn of
the century: I include activists and workers outside the home, including
circus women. I do not use higher education as a litmus test for inclusion
in the definition of "New

Woman" because it excludes a diverse group of women who readily identified
themselves as "New Women." Carol Smith-Rosenberg, "The New Woman as
Androgyne: Social Disorder and Gender Crisis, 1870-1936," in Carol
Smith-Rosenberg, ed., Disorderly Conduct: Visions of Gender in Victorian
America (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1985), p. 265.

²² Ibid.

²³Theodore Roosevelt, "The Strenuous Life," in The Strenuous Life: Essays
and Addresses _____ (New York: Century Co., 1902), p. 4.

²⁴Gail Bederman, Manliness & Civilization, see especially chapters 3-5.

²⁵Charles Theodore Murray, "On the Road with the 'Big Show,'" Cosmopolitan,
pp. 127-128, citation courtesy of Fred Dahlinger.

²⁶"The Latest New Woman," unidentified newspaper clipping, 1896, CWM.

²⁷ According to one female circus worker, "You never see a circus woman in
a city after the season is over. She flees from them, I can tell you. She
detests the noise and the hustle, and almost without exception, they live
in the little country towns where they practice through the winter, go early

to bed and are in fine condition when the season opens." "Life as a Woman of the Circus is not all Glitter: Hard Work and Discipline Her Lot," (New York) *Evening Telegram*, August 27, 1902, **BBPCB 1902-1903**, JMRMA.

²⁸ "Life as a Woman of the Circus Is Not All Glitter..."

²⁹ "An Elephant Trainer by Marriage," Sells-Floto Circus and Buffalo Bill's Original Wild West," show program, 1914-1915, WFCC, IV A, Program Collection, 3/3, **BBHC**.

³⁰ "Quits Ballet for Fortune," (Chicago) *Tribune*, September 9, 1903, **BBPCB 1902-1903**; "The Women of the Circus," unidentified and undated clipping, **BBPCB 1906-1907**; "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: Mama Objects but there May Be a Marriage before the Season is Over," (New York) *Times*, April 28, 1903, **BBPCB 1902-1903**, JMRMA.

³¹ "Circus Women Just Like All Human Beings: You Thought Them Mere Cigarette Smoking Chatter Boxes, Paint-Bedaubed, Etc.," (Des Moines, Iowa) *News*, September 3, 1907, **BBPCB 1906-1907**, JMRMA.

³² Much of this quotation appeared verbatim in Barnum & Bailey and Ringling Brothers show programs over the next two decades. See for example, "Circus Women and Children Healthy, Happy, 'Homey' Gypsies," Barnum & Bailey program, road edition, season 1914, pp. 39-40, CWM.

³³ "Life as a Woman of the Circus is not all Glitter..."

³⁴ "A Circus in Undress," (New York) *Sun*, March 26, 1895.

³⁵ "The Ladies of the Circus," unidentified newspaper clipping, 1891, SBK 17, CWM.

³⁶ "News of the Theater: The Greatest Show on Earth Comes to Town," (New York) *Evening Sun*, March 29, 1895, **BBPCB 1895**, JMRMA.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ Robinson, *The Circus Lady*, pp. 71, 175-178, and 276-277.

³⁹ "Official Program of Barnum & Bailey's Greatest Show on Earth," Madison Square Garden, April 20-25, 1896, LTLBBSP, TMPCC.

⁴⁰ There is much evidence to support my contention that the "revolution in gowning" was fictional. Barnum & Bailey routebooks from 1904-1906 do not mention any changes in costuming nor do the memoirs of scores of performers, both female and male.

126. Al Ringling to Charles Ringling, December 25, 1913, Baraboo, Wis., Archival Collection, Correspondence, RLPLRC.

127. See Dixon, *The Leopard's Spots: A Romance of the White Man's Burden, 1865-1900*; and *The Clansman: An Historical Romance of the Ku Klux Klan*; Grant, *The Passing of the Great Race*.

128. Von Eschen, *Race against Empire*, 58.

129. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, 167.

130. Said, *Orientalism*, 190.

131. "Imre Kiralfy's Sublime Nautical, Martial and Poetical Spectacle, 'Columbus and the Discovery of America', For the First Time now Produced in Connection with the Barnum & Bailey Greatest Show on Earth," (Buffalo: Courier Company, 1892), 10, Program Collection, RLPLRC.

166. "How She Charms Snakes," New York World Herald, n.d., Barnum, Cole, Hutchinson and Cooper Press Book, 1887-1888, JMRMA.
167. Ibid.
168. Bogdan, Freak Show, 256-59.
181. McClintock borrows this term, "master of all I survey" from Pratt, Imperial Eyes, McClintock, Imperial Leather, 57-58, 121-22.
182. "Krao-A Missing Link," Continent, (location unlisted), February 1884, George Chindahl Collection, Box 5, Folder 40, RLPLRC; clipping, n.d., n.p., Scrapbook 6, Barnum & Bailey and Hutchinson, Winter, 1882-1883, JTMC.
183. "Krao, 'The Missing Link,'" n.p., Portland, Maine, February 24, 1883, George Chindahl Collection, Box 5, Folder 40, RLPLRC.
185. Shane Peacock, "Farini the Great," 13-20; "Barnum & Bailey Greatest Show on Earth and Book of Wonders Combined," (New York: George Arlington, 1903) 4th edition; Charles Address, "Day by Day with Barnum & Bailey, Season 1903-1904" (Buffalo: Courier Co., 1904); Charles Address, "Barnum & Bailey Annual Route Book and Illustrated Tours, 1906" (Buffalo: Courier Co., 1904), 116, all route book citations from Route Book Collection, RLPLRC.
186. Harding, "The Joys and Sorrows of A Circus Fat Lady," 62-63.
187. Address, "Day by Day," 28.
- ⁵⁶ "The Barnum & Bailey Greatest Show on Earth Show Program," Madison Square Garden edition (New York: J & H Mayer, 1894), Box 13, Folder 6, PUL.
- ⁵⁷ "Inside Asiatic Life," New York Daily Tribune, Monday February 25, 1895; "The Wild Men of New Guinea," (New York) Press, undated; both from BBPCB 1895, JMRMA.
200. "Seven Sarakaba Beauties Arrive, Proud of Lips as Long as Duckbills," New York Telegraph, March 31, 1930, George Chindahl Collection, Box 4, Folder **86**, RLPLRC.
201. Taylor, Center Ring, and Robert Bogdan, Freak Show, 194-95.
202. Taylor, Center Ring, 80.
203. \$14,968.08 in 2000.
204. "African 'Beauties' Here to Join Circus," New York Times, April 1, 1930, George Chindahl Collection, Box 4, Folder 86, RLPLRC.
205. "Official Program of Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Combined Shows, Season of 1930," New York Coliseum, March 27-April 6, 1930, Program Collection, RLPLRC.
- ⁶⁴ "A New Kind of Censorship," Billboard, May 2, 1914, p. 28, MML.
- ⁶⁵ "Life Goes to a Course in Circus," LIFE, vol. 32, no. 13 (March 31, 1952), p. 110.