E Pluribus Barnum

The Great Showman and the Making of U.S. Popular Culture

Bluford Adams

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“A Stupendous Mirror of Departed Empires”: The Barnum Hippodromes and Circuses

You are an old man, and the vim, vigor and sharp wit and cunning of your youth and manhood have left you. In the course of events you will soon join the famous celebrities that in years gone by adorned your “great moral show.” Then your already written epitaph will, we suppose, be inscribed upon your circus wagons by your zealous partners,

“The show is over, Barnum’s gone? His earthly journey now is done; Ambition did his soul surround, The purchased votes could not be found. The Yankee people would not choose him, But sent him, stuffed, into his Museum. Preserved in wax, his eyes all glass,..."

—from an ad for the Adam Forepaugh Circus titled “To P. T. Barnum,” Philadelphia Evening Bulletin (1884)

When Barnum turned his attention to circuses and hippodromes in the wake of the fire at the Barnum and Van Amburgh Museum and Menagerie Combination, so did some of his star racial exotics. Museum favorites like the “What Is It?” and the Madagascar albino family showed up in the traveling shows that Barnum fielded with Dan Castello and William C. Coup in the early 1870s. But when it came to the exhibition of non-Western people, Barnum’s museums and circuses shared more than a few key performers: in the last decades of the century the Barnum circuses framed their racial exotics in imperialist narratives that strongly echoed the American Museum at midcentury. The importance of those narratives to Barnum’s circuses, and those of his rivals, has not been adequately explored. This chapter examines Barnum’s exhibitions of non-Westerners for what they can tell us about the evolution of U.S. ideologies of race and nation in the post-Civil War era. All of Barnum’s circuses and hippodromes celebrated white, bourgeois manhood under the banners of Christianity and Civilization, but the shows differed in their use of non-Westerners to articulate their social allegiances. I explore this transformation by focusing primarily on the international racial exhibitions of Barnum’s Great Roman Hippodrome of 1874-75 and the Barnum & London Circus of the following decade. The former show brought its white patrons in contact with the East through cross-racial desire and identification. The latter, in contrast, emphasized the racial barrier between white patron and non-Western performer. Whereas the Hippodrome framed its Orientals in empowering political categories such as nationality and monarchy, the Barnum & London Circus reduced non-Westerners to the status of “specimens” in an ethnological schema. Barnum’s reconstruction of the Oriental demonstrated both the expansiveness and the inadequacy of race as a marker of difference in late-nineteenth-century popular cultural and intellectual discourses; moreover, the shows’ racial reconstructions carried contradictory implications for U.S. domestic politics in an age when the circus was often received as a model of industrial discipline. The Orientals offered white patrons a safely mediated access to the passion, poetry, and violence they had supposedly sacrificed to Western progress. But by Othering their non-Western performers in this manner, the Barnum shows betrayed the chinks in the armor of late-nineteenth-century white manhood.

Barnum first incorporated a non-Westerner in one of his traveling shows in 1851, when he joined Seth Howes and Sherwood Stratton (the father of Tom Thumb) as partners in P. T. Barnum’s Asiatic Caravan, Museum, and Menagerie. Among that show’s main Asiatic features was a herd of elephants captured by Barnum’s intrepid agents in the wilds of Ceylon.¹ The elephants were impressive, but not more so than the Cingalese native—billed as a chief—who was imported and displayed with them; indeed, the show’s ads devoted as much space to “chief” as to the herd.² Although the Cingalese was the first non-Westerner on a Barnum road show, he had several predecessors at the American
Museum, whose attractions in the 1840s included a “New Zealand Canibal [sic] chief” and a troupe of Bedouins. Unlike those performers, however, the Cingalese was presented less as a curiosity in himself than as a representative of a larger ethnic group. One bill described him as a member of the “wild and wandering tribe of Kaffirs, whose ferocious habits are vividly described by Eugene [sic] Sue in the Wandering Jew.” Barnum’s new ethnological rhetoric signaled his growing interest in international racial displays. Less than two years before the importation of the Cingalese, he had temporarily suspended plans for his most ambitious such exhibition, one that would occupy him off and on for the next three and a half decades. In Struggles, he recalls how the Lind concerts sidetracked his scheme for

a “Congress of Nations”—an assemblage of representatives of all the nations that could be reached by land or sea. I meant to secure a man and woman, as perfect as could be procured, from every accessible people, civilized and barbarous, on the face of the globe. I had actually contracted with an agent to go to Europe to make arrangements to secure “specimens” for such a show. Even now, I can conceive of no exhibition which would be more interesting and which would appeal more generally to all classes of patrons. (271)\(^5\)

In the 1850s and 1860s, Barnum made various unsuccessful attempts to bring off this exhibition at the American Museum. The showman and his partners sought Circassian women, South African tribesmen, and other exotic people for displays that Barnum planned to call either a “Congress of Nations” or “Human Menagerie.” Barnum’s uncertainty over the title reflects a larger uncertainty over the conception of the exhibit: Would he organize it around the historical category of nation or the biological category of race? Or, to borrow the terminology of Struggles, was he planning a congress of national “representatives” or a menagerie of racial “specimens”? As Barnum’s contradictory vocabulary suggests, by 1869 he still had not answered these questions.

The Congress of Nations

It was only after the destruction of his Museum and his reemergence as a proprietor of traveling shows that Barnum finally suc-ceeded in staging his international congress. In 1872 the circus that Barnum had founded with Coup and Castello—P. T. Barnum’s Great Traveling Museum, Menagerie and World’s Fair—boasted “Fiji cannibals, Modoc and Digger Indians, and representative types of Chinese, Japanese, Aztecs, and Eskimos” (Betts 360). But two more years would pass before Barnum unveiled his first official “Congress of Nations.” This took place in the second traveling show that he formed with Coup: P. T. Barnum’s Great Roman Hippodrome. After opening in the spring of 1874 in a newly constructed building in New York City, this show spent much of its two-year existence touring the United States. As its name would suggest, the Great Roman Hippodrome featured primarily equestrian events, but its most famous attraction was a pageant titled the “Congress of Nations” that opened its early performances. This spectacle only partly fulfilled the plan for a Congress that Barnum had outlined in Struggles. Whereas that scheme called for the exhibition of the world’s “civilized and barbarous” peoples, the Hippodrome’s Congress restricted itself to the “CIVILIZED NATIONS.” And whereas Struggles proposed a display of contemporary countries, the Hippodrome’s Congress re-created both “ANCIENT AND MODERN MONARCHS.” The pageant’s national chariots bore performers who reenacted famous rulers and notables ranging from Confucius to Queen Victoria. It took its history from the Congress of Monarchs, a pageant created by British showmen John and George Sanger. Barnum purchased duplicates of the chariots, costumes, and other paraphernalia of the Sangers’ show for the Hippodrome’s April 1874 opening. His effort to adapt their historical pageant to fit his earlier plans produced some complicated results. In Struggles he recalled the Hippodrome’s “allegorical representation of a ‘Congress of Nations,’ in a grand procession of gilded chariots and triumphal cars, conveying the Kings, Queens, Emperors, and other potentates of the civilized world, costumed with historical correctness” (ST 1875, 849). As Barnum’s vocabulary suggests, in its voyage across the Atlantic, the Sangers’ “historical” Congress of Monarchs had been partly transformed into the “allegorical” Congress of Nations—in fact, it exhibited under both titles during the 1874 season. The pageant’s mingling of history and translistorical allegory can be seen in the Congress’s U.S. and Irish entries. In those chariots, al-
legorical figures such as Hibernia and the American Goddess of Liberty shared a ride with political and military heroes, including George Washington and Daniel O'Connell. The pageant further complicated things by mocking its own concepts of "historical correctness" and nationhood in the miniature chariot filled with "beautuous little children" who represented Lilliput (Haines 80).

The pageant's hybrid, fragmentary, and self-parodying nature sparked conflicting readings from the Hippodrome's class-segmented audience. Patrons felt free to grant or dismiss as it served their purposes the Congress's premise of assembling the world's nations East and West. Whereas some took at face value the pageant's claim to depict "with historic truthfulness the Sovereigns of all Nations, and the manners and customs of nine centuries," others read through the pageant's international, multiracial representations to the white working-class performers beneath. The Congress of Nations thus occasioned a conflict in styles of reading, pitting the allegorical interpretations of the pageant's working-class and female patrons and performers against the literalized dissections of the middle-class male reporters.

Those who looked no further than the Congress's surfaces would have found them controversial enough. Among the thirteen chariots that synecdochically represented "ALL CIVILIZED NATIONS" were ones bearing Muhammad Ali, Tippoo Sahib, and the rulers of Turkey and China. In a decade that saw a rising tide of European imperialism, the display of these figures in the same pageant as Queen Victoria and the pope was remarkable in itself. The Indian chariot alone bore Tippoo Sahib, Aurangzeb, and Dalhousie, the British governor general. The Congress also equated Eastern and Western symbols of power: all the rulers entered the Hippodrome in ornate gilded chariots accompanied by armed cavalrymen, attendants, and national flags. That display forces us to rethink our notion of Orientalism, which is commonly understood as the West's construction of a unified identity for itself in opposition to the myth of a passive, decadent East. Instead, the Congress of Nations was built on a more ambiguous relationship between East and West. The pageant invited white males to identify with the power of Oriental monarchs, but in the process of such cross-racial transactions, the East's Otherness threatened to disappear entirely.

In a pageant that boasted of its fidelity to historical detail, the representation of nonwhite rulers by white performers called into question the supposedly unbridgeable gulf of race. The Hippodrome's 1875 courier noted, "The persons chosen to represent the royal and celebrated individuals in this vivid pageant are selected with great care, so that each shall closely resemble in face and physique the originals [sic]." White male Hippodrome patrons thus could identify with the emperor of China through the mediation of a white look-alike. The Congress of Nations encouraged cross-racial identification among heterosexual male patrons when it distinguished the Eastern rulers from Western ones by displaying the former with eroticized female companions. The result was a scopophilic gaze that can be discussed through the model developed by Laura Mulvey, who argues that the (implicitly heterosexual) male film viewer identifies with his potent on-screen counterpart through their shared female erotic object (59-67). Contemporary responses to the Hippodrome hint at similar fantasies of identification that took place between male patrons and Eastern rulers over the bodies of the women representing seraglios, houris, and harems. But given that all three terms in this equation were white, such identifications were as likely to obliterate racial categories as to transgress them. The New York Herald recorded this response to the exhibit's racial masquerade: "The Sultan of Turkey and his harem suggested a remark from some one that 'Barnum ought to represent Brigham Young and his wives in the next chariot.'" The comparison between Turks and Mormons suggests the contradictory responses called up by the Congress: Brigham Young can be read as supplying a mediating term between the phallic sultan and the Caucasian leer of the reporter and his fellow. But since it was widely recognized that the sultan was being played by a white man, the comparison can also be read as abandoning the fiction of a non-Western presence.

Watching a white man playing a Turk, the anonymous spectator is reminded only of another white man.

Other commentators also found white meanings beneath the Congress's racial masquerade. When the Hippodrome returned to New York in November 1874 after a five-city tour, the Tribune read through the Oriental costumes of the Congress to suggest that its stakes were domestic, rather than international, power relations.
In reviewing the Hippodrome's parade, the paper estimated that "the largest proportion" of the Congress's Oriental potentates and their attendants were being played by Irish Americans:

Many of these seemed oppressed with their burden of responsibility as representatives of distant countries, and their downcast eyes and uncertain gait might have been attributed to sad memories of native lands far away, but that their occasional ejaculations evinced a surprising familiarity with the vernacular albeit tinged somewhat by a brogue.

With their downcast eyes, these "Eastern rulers" are the ridiculed objects, rather than the identificatory subjects, of the male audience's gaze. Spectators heckled the Congress's "monarchs" as they passed in procession (mocking a "solemn Turk" for his big blue beard). Although the Tribune's reporter shares their derision of the performers, he also patronizes the parade's audience. The spectacle, he notes, was "well calculated to excite the Bowery, to drive the East side frantic with delight, and to astound the casual countryman." The Congress's real meaning, he suggests, lies in its affirmation of U.S. hierarchies of class and ethnicity. Moreover, he marks his (and his reader's) place in those hierarchies through his ability to read beneath the Congress's allegory. Unlike the pageant's naïve immigrant, rural, and working-class audience, the Tribune's middle-class reader knows better than to believe what he or she sees on the surfaces.

In reading beneath the Congress of Nations to mock its Irish American performers and their audience, the Tribune tacitly recognized the pageant's, and indeed the entire Hippodrome's, tribute to Irish nationalism and culture. If the Congress's depths revealed Irish humility, its surfaces celebrated, in the words of one reporter, "Hibernia riding in triumph." The Hippodrome played to its Irish American patrons with a grand finale titled "DONNYBROOK FAIR and the LANCASHIRE RACES." Billed as "a medley of entertainment characteristic of the national sports of Ireland," this segment included sack, wheelbarrow, and donkey races; also featured, according to the Spirit of the Times, was the "fighting Celt, who hits a head whenever he sees it." Irish American patrons who winced at such scenes of peasant fun could take solace in their homeland's dignified entry in the Congress of Nations. Reporters in New York and Boston agreed that one of the most heavily applauded chariots in the pageant carried an allegorical female "genius of Ireland" who smiled to the band's rendition of "Wearing of the Green." The patrons' cheers for the Irish chariot accord with Michael Denning's discussion of allegory as a mode of reading characteristic of oppressed groups (73–74). It was in opposition to the Congress's Irish allegory that the metropolitan press dissected the show in terms of the social variables of class and ethnicity.

Irish Americans were also prominent among the workers in the Hippodrome's crew and supporting cast. With its roster of nearly one thousand performers, the Congress of Nations required substantial temporary, low-wage labor of the sort that was in ample supply in the wake of the 1873 depression. That pool of unemployed workers enabled Barnum and his partners to take the Hippodrome on the road in 1874 and 1875. They hired local labor to build the huge wood and canvas structures in which the Hippodrome exhibited outside New York. A reporter who visited the show's grounds before its 1874 Boston opening noted, "The locality of the show has been the centre of attraction for all the unemployed and unwashed of the city for many days, and when the actual labors of preparing for the assembling of the initial audience began, the crowds about the tents could be numbered by hundreds." At a time when the unprecedented phenomena of massive industrial unemployment and nationwide working-class radicalism were beginning to panic the middle class, this reporter was comforted by the Hippodrome's ability to discipline its temporary help. He marveled at the "prevailing system" that dominated all the show's employees, including "the human animals, hired for the assistant parts." As the opening act and the sole opportunity of the temporary employees to come out from behind the scenes, the Congress of Nations stood as the epitome of "well-directed labor." The reporter was especially impressed by the work of the show's permanent employees, "busied in the arrangement of the thousand auxiliaries to the public exhibition, and preparing their human and other animals for the 'Grand Entree' called 'The Congress of Nations.'" He thus manages to find what amount to racialized differences in the Congress, even while ignoring its ostensible display of the world's races; he denigrates the pageant's white, working-class "human animals" in the same bestial terms.
his contemporaries applied to people of color. This racialization of class differences indicates the mutually reinforcing character of imperialist and domestic oppression in bourgeois discourses of the period, a mutuality that Richard Slotkin has discussed in terms of “the reversible analogy” between white workers and Native Americans that pervaded contemporary journalism (311). Racist, classist accounts of “urban savages” and “tramp armies” proliferated throughout the decade as a series of railroad strikes culminated in the Great Strike of 1877.

Against such menacing images, Barnum offered armies of a different sort. His show’s 1875 courier quoted General Sherman’s testimony that “the whole of the Hippodrome scenes are marvelous for their excellence, and the perfect training, discipline, and system which pervades it.” Military imagery would recur in the Barnum circuses’ advertising for the next two decades, but only rarely were the coercive class implications of such ads so explicit as during the Hippodrome’s 1874 Boston appearances. One local reporter recast the show’s temporary laborers as “recruits” in a military campaign being waged by commander Barnum: “The supernumerary wing of the army is composed largely of Bostonians. When the commander proceeds to the capture of Philadelphia, he will muster out these recruits, and enlist, in their places, Philadelphians.” In a decade that would see militias (including the one from Philadelphia) firing on crowds of unemployed and striking workers, the Hippodrome’s military metaphors suggested that everybody was on the same side.

The Congress’s disciplining of its plebeian male auxiliaries was crucial to the Hippodrome’s image as a respectable, feminized, “moral show,” an alternative to male-oriented, working-class amusements. Like the American Museum, the Great Roman Hippodrome marketed its supervised, alcohol-free environment as ideal for “ladies” and their children. One ad for the show quoted the praises of New York’s religious press, which were typified by the Christian at Work: “Never was there such a show, as to the matter of decency and good morals. In this respect Barnum is entitled to the heartiest thanks of all good Christian people.” The Hippodrome cultivated such reviews by distancing itself from the disreputable connotations that clung to the nineteenth-cen-

tury circus. Despite the fact that it boasted all the standard features of a circus except the clowns, its ads insisted: “NOTHING CONNECTED WITH THIS ESTABLISHMENT RESEMBLES A CIRCUS.” Even reviewers who ignored such claims agreed that the Hippodrome was a haven for respectable mothers and their children. The New York Times acknowledged: “The establishment has already become the resort of ladies and little ones, who seem especially delighted with what they see.”

Activities taking place both outside and inside the Hippodrome’s walls compromised its respectable, feminized public image. Adjacent to the 1874 Hippodrome in Philadelphia, Barnum and lesser entrepreneurs cashed in on the market for masculinist, plebeian amusements with “Barnumville,” a ragtag collection of sideshows (one of them belonging to Barnum), bars, and quack medicine displays. A reporter who toured Barnumville noted the frankly sexual behavior of many of its patrons, as well as the scantily clad females advertised by Barnum’s own sideshow. The conventions of bourgeois womanhood were also being contested inside the Hippodrome. As equestriennes, chariot drivers, and highwire walkers, the Hippodrome’s female performers took risks, suffered injuries, and won praises usually reserved for men. The show acknowledged the fine line it was treading by gendering its performers’ acts whenever possible, as in the case of the highwire performer Mlle Victoria: “No such exhibition of feminine intrepidity and daring nonchalance has ever been known in the profession.” But in a show that featured four-horse chariot races between male and female drivers, feminine intrepidity was often difficult to distinguish from the masculine variety. Ignoring the careful distinctions of the show’s ads, reviewers praised the female performers in language usually coded masculine. One commentator remarked on the riders’ “skill and courage,” and another found the women’s races “exciting and gallant.” Underlying such comments was genuine surprise at the women’s competitiveness. A Boston reporter noted the “peculiar and, as may be believed, unlooked-for difficulty” that arose when the “ladies” began competing among themselves during Hippodrome rehearsals.

To gauge fully the transgressive force of the Hippodrome’s equestriennes, one must turn from the racetrack to the Congress
of Nations, where they also performed, inspiring both condemnation and arousal in male commentators. A New York Herald reporter demonstrated the inseparability of the two responses:

The ladies of the seraglio of the Pasha of Egypt, mounted on camels, were not improved in beauty or gracefulness by their wiggle-waggle riding on the backs of the animals. But that may be the custom of the country. Those who “saw the elephant” in the line of the cortège [sic] of the representative of India had their impressions improved in regard to the creature by the beautiful hoursi who were in the same company.33

The reporter oscillates between blaming the women for their cross-racial performance and submerging them in it. He initially chastises them for betraying the traditional virtues of American womanhood (i.e., “beauty...gracefulness”) by posing as sensual Orientals, but his moralizing tone evaporates in the final sentence. There he accepts the pageant’s Orientalist fiction in order to savor the “hoursis” as an ornamental, inseparable part of the elephant they accompany.

The Herald reviewer’s selective unmasking of the Congress’s brown-face performers can be read as an attempt to reassert the gender hierarchy challenged by the Hippodrome’s women. When he unveils the white women enacting the seraglio but not the white man playing the pasha, he raises the specter of miscegenation, thereby linking the gender transgressions of the Hippodrome’s women to the infinitely more terrifying “crime” of interracial sex. To forestall such readings, the Hippodrome went to some lengths to paint its numerous unmarried female performers as both intrepid and respectable. The most spectacular instance of this was the world’s first wedding aboard a balloon, which took place above the Hippodrome’s Cincinnati grounds on 19 October 1874. Equestrienne Mary Walsh married ticket seller Charles Colton in a balloon decorated with “[f]our flags, two American, and two of Ireland’s green.”34 The presence of Barnum’s partner Coup in the basket and some thirty thousand spectators on the ground speaks to the Hippodrome’s desire to domesticate the image of its female performers.35 The following year, a Wisconsin reporter indicated the success of that strategy when he observed, “The class of women in the employ of the Hippodrome is...much superior to any we ever remember having seen.”36 Al-

though they handled their chariots like men, Barnum’s “Amazonian Drivers” were as respectable as the ladies who watched them.

The Ethnological Congress

The subordination of white women to white men remained a primary symbolic goal in 1884, when Barnum unveiled his next major exhibit, the Ethnological Congress of the Barnum & London Circus (the show that Barnum then owned with James A. Bailey and James L. Hutchinson). But whereas white male spectators and white female performers had skirmished across the Congress of Nations’s racial masquerade, this new Congress positioned white men and women on the same side of the color line. With the Ethnological Congress, the Barnum & London Circus began privileging race as a marker of the radical difference between its predominantly white audiences and its nonwhite performers. The new Congress can be seen as the second half of Barnum’s midcentury vision of “representatives...from every accessible people, civilized and barbarous, on the face of the globe” (ST 271). With its thirteen chariots, the Congress of Nations had synecdochically exhibited “ALL CIVILIZED NATIONS,” whereas the Ethnological Congress boasted “100 UNCIVILIZED, SUPERSTITIOUS AND SAVAGE PEOPLE” (see Figure 11).37 The Congress of Nations and the Ethnological Congress, however, also stood as competing descriptions for the same people, as both represented Egypt, China, and India. The reconception of the Oriental as the savage “specimen” rather than the potent, civilized monarch reveals the sharper, institutionally policed racial lines that characterized the Barnum circuses after 1880.

The Ethnological Congress amounted to a thoroughgoing rebuttal of the Congress of Nations. Whereas the latter offered allegory, self-parody, and dazzle, its successor stood for empiricism, scientific detachment, and discipline. With its Lilliputian chariot and cross-racial performances, the Congress of Nations mocked and undermined the categories of nationhood and civilization upon which it was based. In contrast, the Ethnological Congress was largely concerned with proving the clarity and permanence of its racial categories. The Congress of Nations put a blue beard on an Irishman and called him a Turk; ten years later, the Ethno-
logical Congress insisted on the authenticity of its rare, nonwhite human "specimens," taken from their native habitats. It boasted "THE ONLY GENUINE ZULUS EVER EXHIBITED IN AMERICA" and attacked other circuses' Zulus as costumed "Southern negroes" (History 3). At a time when African American circus laborers routinely doubled as racial exotics, the Congress's critics inevitably questioned the authenticity of its "specimens." Rival showman Adam Forepaugh taunted Barnum: "YOU advertise '100 superstitious and idolatrous people.' If you include your agents and partners in this enumeration it may approach the truth!" (Too White). Barnum & London responded by depicting its Congress as the product of three years' labor in places "where a white man never trod before." This was only a slight exaggeration: Saxon has documented the agents and letters that Barnum sent "to every part of our little ball of earth" on behalf of his exhibit (SL 228).

The difference between the Congress of Nations and the Ethnological Congress is evident in the contrasting audience responses they implied. In Struggles, Barnum recalled that the Congress of Nations was intended to overpower the beholder with "an effect at once brilliant and bewildering" (ST 1889, 291), a phrase that hints at the scopophilic identification between male spectators and the pageant's phallic "Orientals." In contrast, Barnum imagined a coolly detached, professional male viewer of the Ethnological Congress: "The ethnologist finds gathered together for his leisurely inspection representatives of notable and peculiar tribes ... types which otherwise he would never see, as they can only be sought in their native countries" (ST 1889, 349). Barnum's ideal spectator views the representatives not as people with whom he might identify but as specimens who fit the racial categories in his head. The showman's memory accurately reflects the exhibit's construction of the male response. The Ethnological Congress's publicity materials posited a different reaction from women, however. Newspaper ads proclaimed that the exhibit would be "of incalculable benefit to scientists, naturalists, and students, and a never-ceasing source of wonderment to ladies and children and the entire community of the country." Lacking the education that allowed their male counterparts to analyze the exhibit dispassionately, women would be struck spell-
bound in passive wonderment. By gendering the responses in this fashion, the Ethnological Congress worked to reinstate the white male atop the social hierarchy that had been shaken in the Hippodrome.

The Ethnological Congress worked to elevate white men above not only white female patrons, but also nonwhite performers. Indeed, an 1884 courier presents the Congress's representatives reacting to their display with an emotionalism that rivals that of the hypothetical female spectator: "[T]heir suspicious natures are the more aroused and irritated from being surrounded by hated strangers, in a strange land, where everything is at variance with their customs and superstitions." As the victims of their emotions, the Congress's representatives could be the objects, but never the subjects, of knowledge—a view that marked a break with earlier Barnum & London non-Westerners. This transformation is evident in the presentation of two Chinese stars of the early-1880s Barnum & London show, Chang Yu Sing and Che Mah the Rebel Chinese Dwarf. Chang's presentation exemplified what Robert Bogdan has called the aggrandized mode, which emphasized a freak's cultural or intellectual attainments rather than his or her physical oddity (108–9). An 1881 ad described Chang as "the Chinese Giant, not the ogre of Fairy Tales, but [a] Gentleman, Scholar and Linguist—the tallest man in the world." The epitome of the civilized Oriental, Chang combined erudition, cosmopolitan sophistication, and paternalism; one engraving from the period features him towering over a crowd of white people as he carefully supports a tiny white girl in the palm of his hand (see Figure 12).

But in 1882 Chang's image of benevolent wisdom was countered by the sinister intelligence of Che Mah, which was portrayed in a Barnum & London courier:

[H]e is cunning, crafty and a diplomat, whose tact and ingenuity have been a source of great annoyance and bloodshed to his government. In Western China, on account of his diminutive physique and superior erudition, he became an oracle and was WORSHIPPED AND SET UP AS A GOD! whose commands became law among his fellow men.

Recognizing the threat represented by Che Mah's power, the emperor declared him a rebel and sent an army against him. Che
Mah courageously led his forces in the ensuing battle, and then fled to Siberia. It was not his gallantry, however, but his terrible power over his fellow Chinese that dominated his presentation in the Barnum & London show. Ads depict the dwarf impassively enthroned above a group of energetically genuflecting Chinese. In the year of the Exclusion Act, knowledge in the hands of an Asian was clearly a dangerous thing.

Although Che Mah was no longer with the show at the debut of the Ethnological Congress, Barnum & London used Chang to reconstruct the Oriental as the raw material, rather than the repository, of knowledge. By 1884 the circus's advertising still stressed Chang's benign mental attainments, but at the official unveiling of the Ethnological Congress he was rechristened as "THE GOLIATH OF HIS RACE AND THE TALLEST GIANT ALIVE." Reduced to bits of information about his body and race, Chang was assigned the duty of leading the Ethnological Congress into the big top.

Like so many enterprises carried out before and since in the name of science, the Ethnological Congress couched its white male supremacy in the vocabulary of objectivity and empiricism. The circus boasted of its agents' tireless pursuit of their human "specimens" in a globe-embracing quest undertaken with no concern for cost. A Louisville reporter demonstrated the success of the circus's rhetoric: "There are enough of these people from all over the world to afford material for [a] very serious and important scientific investigation." But even the show's claims to objectivity suggest its contrived nature: "EVERY RUDE BARBARIAN PRESENTED EXACTLY AS DESCRIBED IN HISTORY" (History 2). Since the "history" the "barbarians" were said to fulfill was written by white imperialists, the Ethnological Congress neatly demonstrates the closed loop that is Orientalism.

The Congress's particular brand of scientific rigor was the culmination of Barnum's four decades of planning. Whereas at mid-century he had envisioned a collection of sample humans "as perfect as could be procured" (ST 271), he soon changed his notion of what he was looking for in a specimen. In an 1860 speech, he announced his intention of displaying at the American Museum a "Congress of Nations," composed of "outre specimens of human-
Hindostan, and including the remarkable females who do not shrink from the barbarous custom of marrying a whole family, no matter how many brothers said family may contain. 52

In a statement that suggests the Congress's multiple, contradictory interpretations of race, this reporter first establishes non-white skin as the common denominator of the "personages" and then proceeds to describe the representatives in terms of physical oddity, native lands, and customs—potentially overlapping subcategories that he makes no attempt to relate to one another: the bearded woman's homeland and marital status go unmentioned. In these subcategories, the Ethnological Congress demonstrates both the expansiveness and the inadequacy of race as a signifier of difference in the late-nineteenth-century United States.

As the Congress began coming together during the 1883 season, its billing tapped into long-standing notions about the breadth and permanence of racial categories. Barnum & London promised to "place upon exhibition the various types of humanity from all sections of the earth," thereby demonstrating to youths "the marvelous work of our Creator that can never be effaced." 53 Such ads invoked the ethnological concept of the racial type, the biological norm to which any person could be traced (Odom 6–9). For a century in the West, the categories of race and type had been steadily broadened to include an array of nonphysical characteristics, including intellect, morality, and psychology (Odom 7–8). The Barnum & London Circus demonstrated the inclusiveness of its own racial categories in listing the Congress's highlights: "Cannibals, Nubians, Zulus, Mohammedans, Pagans, Indians, Wild Men." 54 Although this list mixes what are, in current usage, terms for tribe, religion, and race, in the Ethnological Congress they all signified racial types "that can never be effaced." The broad conception of race was at times incorporated into the exhibit's titles, which included the "Ethnological Congress of Heathens and Barbarians" and the "Ethnological Congress of Strange and Heathen Types of Human Beings."

When Barnum & London followed contemporary ethnologists by reading into racial categories characteristic personalities, beliefs, and states of consciousness, it risked diluting the signifying power of its performers' nonwhite skin. Because cultural terms such as heathen could be employed cross-racially (for example, to attack non-Christian white Americans), the Ethnological Congress had to anchor cultural markers of difference with physical ones. The Chicago Tribune indicated the relative power of the two levels of signifiers in its story on those "genuine ethnological curiosities," the circus's Australian aborigines (see Figure 13). It describes their culture in sensational detail, noting their diet, clothing, dwellings, and treatment of the dead. But bracketing its references to the Australians' bizarre cultural practices are views of their bodies; the story opens with references to their small stature, "almost jet black skin," and "gorillaish features," and closes with descriptions of their scarification and the quills they wear in their nostrils. 55 Although the paper's anthropological evidence allows it to quantify the Australians' Otherness in lurid detail, their marked bodies prove it with an irrefutable finality.

The circus's search for the anatomical markers that would signify racial difference came amid an unprecedented effort on the part of Darwinian ethnologists to measure and systematize the physical differences among the races. As Thomas Gossett writes, Social Darwinists sought physical confirmation of their belief that the Anglo-Saxon had evolved from darker, more primitive races that supposedly still inhabited Africa and Asia. By the final decades of the century they had measured various races' skin color, skulls, foreheads, brains, body lice, and hair—all in a vain search for the physical proof of the superiority of Euro-Americans to the rest of the world's peoples. Some ethnologists openly despaired of finding physical criteria with which to distinguish (and thereby rank) the world's races (Gossett Race 69–83). But where ethnology failed, the Ethnological Congress succeeded. If there was no infallible means—not even skin color—that separated white people from everybody else, the bodily Otherness of the Congress's freaks was beyond dispute.

In a show that already boasted a separate, well-advertised collection of human curiosities, the presence of tattooed Hindu dwarves, giants, bearded women, and "big lipped people" in the Ethnological Congress testified to Barnum & London's efforts to mark its racial types with bodily difference. 56 Granted, some of the people in the Congress were billed as "well-proportioned." 57 More typical of the representatives, however, were the "short-headed,
A TRIBE OF MALE AND FEMALE
AUSTRALIAN CANNIBALS

Also known as Bushmen, Black-breasteds and Boomerang throwers. These are the only ones of their monstrous, self-degraded and hopelessly embarkied race, ever lured from the remote, unexplored and dread-infested wilds where they were an indescribable war of extermination, that they may gratify their infernal appetites and

GORSE THEMSELVES UPON EACH OTHER’S FLESH

Their only weapon besides an atrocity that defies deadly skill, is

THE BOOMERANG

A crescent-shaped chip of hard wood, which is made to reverse the accepted laws of projection and gravity, and then dashed the object it is destined to return and strike with unerring aim. A small one. No other people have ever been able to master this secondary element.

UNDEEIZED AND DISTORTED IN FORM

With bonyness, ferocity and treachery stamped upon their faces; their cruel eyes reflecting but a glimmering of reason, having no gift of speech beyond an ape-like gibberish, utterly unintelligible to any one else, they are but one step removed from brutish human form, and

BEYOND CONCEPTION MOST CURIOUS TO LOOK UPON.

Figure 13. Australian cannibals in the Ethnological Congress. Circus World Museum, Baraboo, Wisconsin.

broad-skulled and flat-faced” Buddhist priests and Arada the Guatemalan dwarf, “The most astonishing specimen of BE-LIT-TLED, MIS-SHAPEN, SAVAGE HUMANITY ever discovered.” ⁵⁸ Arada and his fellows were not to be seen alongside Barnum & London’s white fat women, living skeletons, and armless men. While the latter appeared in the museum tent, members of the Ethnological Congress took up their positions around the cages of the menagerie tent. ⁵⁹ The appearance of the non-Westerners alongside the animals would have supported the show’s depiction of them as “BESTIAL” and “Embruites [sic].” ⁶⁰

The Ethnological Congress’s strategy of marking race with “singular disfigurements of the person” reshaped the construction of later Barnum & London curiosities. This was most spectacularly demonstrated in 1887, when the show unveiled its latest prize, the Hairy Family of Burmah. Mah-Phoon and Moungh-Phoset were distinguished from earlier Barnum & London curiosities (including the hirsute Jo-Jo the “Dog-Faced Russian Boy”) who were celebrated for their physical uniqueness. The circus’s courier insisted that the Burmese “do not come heralded as either freaks or monstrosities, but as pure, long-established types of the most weirdly, peculiar, distinct race of mankind of whom there is any trace or record.” ⁶¹ Ads traced the pair’s lineage back four generations to some earlier representatives of their “race” who belonged to a late-eighteenth-century Burmese king. The implications of this genealogy were corroborated by Lady Dufferin, the wife of the governor general of India, who allegedly exclaimed upon seeing the Burmese: “OH! WHAT A WONDERFUL RACE.” ⁶² If the Ethnological Congress sought to produce race through bodily “disfigurement,” the Hairy Family represented the elevation of “disfigurement” to the status of race.

White Manhood and Departed Empires

To understand more fully why the Barnum & London Circus marked race with physical “peculiarities,” one must turn from its non-Western bodies to the white male body that was their unspoken subtext. Though not a physical presence in the Ethnological Congress, the white male body, and the ideology of manhood it symbolized, showed up in the exhibit’s contradictory construction
of the Oriental. It is only by looking to the anxieties of middle-class white men that one can explain the apparent conflicts in the show's representation of nonwhites. Barnum & London depicted its non-Westerners as brutal and gentle, innocent and wise, animalistic and ethereal. Equally ambiguous was the circus's attitude toward the destruction of its non-Westerners by white "civilization"; although it inevitably heralded this "progress," it sometimes lamented what was being lost. By constructing their Orientals as contradictory and even self-contradictory, the Barnum & London Circus and its successor, the Barnum & Bailey Show, generated in white audiences the play of identification and Othering that Stuart Hall has analyzed as the internal dynamic of racism (28). The circuses exploited the non-Westerner not simply as the decadent Other of their images of poten white manhood, but also as the vehicle of an implicit critique of Western rationality, science, and capitalism.

When they supplied white male patrons with Orientalized Others, the Barnum shows were intervening in a crisis of middle-class manhood that has been traced by historians and cultural critics to an array of intellectual and social sources. In the last decades of the nineteenth century, unprecedented psychological and philosophical critiques of the self combined with economic transformations to undermine the middle-class male's sense of his own autonomy. In the workplace, men participated in the emergence of an industrial economy where, as Anthony Rotundo has written, even the top executives had to submit to the new structures of authority (248-49). The growth of a permanent bureaucracy of male clerks, accountants, and middle managers signaled for some commentators the decline of white manhood into dependency and timidity. The promise of steady upward mobility—extended to white youths by Barnum and other advocates of self-made manhood—was beginning to sound increasingly anachronistic in 1885 William Dean Howells invited readers to chuckle at Silas Lapham's naive faith in the old success ethos. Late-nineteenth-century reformers and commentators responded to the crisis in middle-class manhood by calling for a strenuous, even "primitive," style of white masculinity based on athletics and militarism. By the turn of the century, advocates of American strenuousness such as Theodore Roosevelt were tapping the alleged primitivism of the dark-skinned victims of U.S. imperialism. But as early as the 1880s, the Barnum circus had already demonstrated the importance of non-Westerners to the formation of the new masculine ideal.

The circus had obvious uses for a cult of masculinity obsessed with the power and beauty of the white male body. After preaching bodily self-control to earlier generations of American youths, middle-class ideologists ended the century calling for a more muscular and aggressive style of white manhood. Reverend Josiah Strong, one of the era's most influential social commentators, suggested the racial importance of embodying strenuous masculinity when he proclaimed: "We now know that the [white] race cannot be perfected without perfecting the body" (quoted in Takaki 263). Throughout the 1880s the Barnum show helped embody the new white masculinity by featuring individual sports (including boxing, gymnastics, and wrestling) calculated to display its male performers' strength and beauty. At times, the circus dropped all pretense of competition to feature the white male body as a spectacle in itself; the Silbon Troupe, for example, offered "Classic Posturing and Display, reproductions of Ancient Gladiatorious Combats and celebrated groups of Statuary." Fuelling the demand for such acts was the suspicion of many Anglo-Americans that they belonged to a decadent, emasculated race (Gossett Race 303-9). With white manhood on the defensive as never before, even rivalries between circus owners could become cruelly embodied. In 1884, Adam Forepaugh attacked Barnum's show by drawing attention to Barnum's seventy-four-year-old body: "You are an old man, and the vim, vigor and sharp wit and cunning of your youth and manhood have left you."

The anxieties of white males over their youth and manhood frequently found expression in the Barnum show's depictions of racial conflict. From the menacing Native Americans of the Great Roman Hippodrome to the Afghans and Zulus of the Greatest Show on Earth, Barnum regularly titillated audiences with images of their destruction at the hands of darker, more masculine races. The Barnum & Bailey Real Wild Moorish Caravan, for example, was pictured in ads with their phallic rifles upraised, charging off the page at newspaper readers. But for every menacing Moor or Afghan, the later Barnum circuses offered two images of deca-
dent nonwhites who were no threat to anyone but themselves. So dominant was this emphasis on dying peoples and cultures that by 1889 the Barnum & Bailey Circus could refer to itself as "A STUPENDOUS MIRROR OF DEPARTED EMPIRES." The departed and departing races in the Ethnological Congress ranged from the Australian "cannibals," who waged "an endless war of extermination" upon themselves, to the polyandrous Todars and last Aztecs—all of them vestiges of older, obsolete peoples. The decadence of the races manifested itself in the fragility of their individual members: "Many of the rarest savage representatives have reached these shores but to die, and fresh expeditions had to be again started to replace them." This emphasis on the moribundity of the non-Westerners brought the circus in line with Social Darwinist anthropologists and social critics who were convinced that nonwhite races, including Native Americans and African Americans, would soon be extinct by "natural" causes. The familiarity of U.S. audiences with such discourses would have allowed them to read domestic meanings into the decadence of Barnum's exotic nonwhites. The Barnum show encouraged such readings by comparing its non-Westerners to U.S. minorities: the color of the Ethnological Congress's Nubians, for example, was said to be "not unlike [that of] the ebony negroes" (History 6). Such comparisons were supported by the dearth of nonprimitive roles for people of color in the nineteenth-century circus. Barnum's patrons were far more likely to see nonwhites performing as skin-clad "savages" than as equestrians, acrobats, and musicians.

Barnum's decadent non-Westerners were clearly intended as a foil to his circus's images of potent white manhood, but that was not their only function. As they were killed off, the Barnum racial exotics took with them cultures and societies that were sometimes depicted as preferable to those of their white conquerors. Such eulogies obviously countered the Barnum show's usual celebration of Western capitalism and science, but the contradiction allowed the decadent races to stand as a seductive, safely distant alternative to the circus's regime of military-style discipline. A Barnum & London courier sounded the characteristically elegiac note: "[I]ke most of the ancient people of the world, the GLORY OF THE ANCIENT HINDOO HAS DEPARTED And is now a dream of the past before the aggressive stride of civilization" (History 4). Edward Said has argued that at stake in such nostalgia for a lost, mystical Orient is actually a longing for a lost romantic West (113–23). In Orientalism, the West constructs an idealized, anachronistic East to embody the impulses it has supposedly sacrificed to the "aggressive stride of civilization." This dynamic ran through the Barnum Circus's presentation of its non-Westerners as the embodiments of everything that had been trained out of its white performers, crew, and audience. Given the level of discipline at which the show operated, its need for an Orientalist safety valve was at times great.

The Barnum & London Circus could be surprisingly explicit in preferring its non-Westerners to the white imperialists who had overran them. The Ethnological Congress sometimes even raised doubts about its own colonizing intentions, as in its portrait of the Aztecs, "that once invincible race...whose half-oblitered history, the key to which science has never been able to discover, is written upon the monuments of their gigantic genius, which were as old as the ages ere Cortez came, in the name of christianity and civilization, to plunder, murder and enslave." Science here stands as the latter-day Cortez, the European discoverer who cynically exploited Aztec culture under false pretenses. Whereas this juxtaposition is the Ethnological Congress's most explicit acknowledgment of the imperialist politics behind its own scientific rhetoric, the construction of many Barnum non-Westerners displays a similar ambivalence about ethnology. Indeed, some of their value as exhibits seems to depend upon their defiance of the explanatory powers of Western science. The Hairy Family, for example, was described as "the most difficult problem with which ingenious speculative ethnological science has had to contend...solitary, unparalleled, inexplicable" (In Grand).

The Barnum Orientals were the one unknowable, uncontrollable, unassimilable feature of a circus that by the 1880s was offering itself as a model of capitalist rationality and discipline. The Barnum show sold reporters on its management by inviting them behind the scenes to witness its intensively disciplined crew:

It is a perfect system, maintained by the most rigid discipline, that does the work. The 600 or more employees are assigned to the several departments. Every man has his particular piece of
work to do, just the same as in a great factory.... Each gang of men is in charge of a boss, and, depend upon it, these bosses keep their eyes wide open.76

Barnum’s working-class patrons must have found such puffery especially ironic. For them, Circus Day meant a holiday from the factory—one worth struggling over if necessary: when an Easton, Pennsylvania, cotton mill refused to close during an 1883 stand of the Adam Forepaugh Circus, four hundred female operatives walked out “in defiance of an order threatening a discharge.”77 Like Mark Twain’s Connecticut Yankee (who attributes his revolutionary impulses to “the circus side of my nature” [Connecticut 129]), the Easton operatives still found something liberatory in one of the nation’s most heavily capitalized culture industries. One wonders, however, if they would have walked out over Barnum’s show, which was far less interested in a working-class patronage than Forepaugh’s. Barnum would later observe of his rival: “He don’t cater for the genteel & refined class & he don’t get them, but he pleases the masses” (SL 294).

Barnum not only catered to the “genteel & refined class,” he got them. He sought his patrons among those who valued not an escape from discipline, but a heightening of it. Barnum & London promised patrons that inside the tents, “SYSTEM, That wonderful disciplinarian, rises in its power and might on every hand.”78 Such order attracted audiences whose gentility frequently surprised reporters.79 Recalling the “howling mobs” that had once gathered under the big top, a St. Louis journalist marveled at the carriages outside the Barnum & London show: those vehicles “suggested that there might be grand opera going on within.”80 Barnum had clearly “elevated” the circus, but in the process he had bored some of his patrons. By the end of the decade, his show had incorporated audience participation, surprise appearances by celebrities, and other “spontaneous” touches, all apparently in an attempt to counter charges that the circus had become too routinized, safe, and stale.81

The ultimate safety valve for the discipline of the Barnum circus was to be found in the racial exotics, whose status as outsiders to Western systems of morals, knowledge, and economics enabled them to embody a whole range of white fantasy and fear. Patrons could lose themselves in the sensual beauty of the Nautch dancers or “the extraordinary concatenation of sound produced by [the] half-a-dozen turbaned desperadoes” accompanying Barnum’s white elephant.82 Typical of such cross-racial transactions is the Chicago Tribune’s description of the Australian “cannibals,” which was followed by a story titled “Barnum’s Perfect System—How It Got Away with a Hurricane.” The piece’s Wheeling author marvels at the “wonderful system upon which the show is run.” He is particularly struck by the silent, lightning-quick response of the canvasmen and animal trainers to their supervisors’ whistles. Searching for the secret to such an impressive display of discipline, the reporter turns to showman James A. Bailey, who intones: “We know our men.” But in the next column readers would discover that the coercive power of Bailey’s knowledge did not apply equally to all his men. The Australians not only tested the boundaries of ethnological “knowing,” but they also lay outside the boundaries of capitalist discipline, given that, as the Chicago reporter notes, they “do no work.”83 The contrast points to a final interpretation of the “disfigured” bodies of the Barnum non-Westerners: whereas the “perfect,” white bodies of the circus laborers disappear into their function (i.e., if the circus is a “great factory,” these operatives have become part of their machines), the “disfigured,” scarified bodies of the Australians stubbornly resist appropriation. Even as it celebrated the disciplining of its white workers and audiences, the Barnum & London Circus thus offered a glimpse of a world where labor was not alienated.

Given the transparency of the circus’s Orientalism, it was perhaps inevitable that commentators begin reading the Barnum non-Westerners as thinly disguised versions of their white audiences. By the mid-1880s, the circus’s Orientalized performances were already accepted by some writers as performances instead of objective ethnological demonstrations. One reporter noted how a trip to the Barnum & London dressing room could transform an “unassuming and quiet-appearing citizen” into a “wild warrior of the desert plains...or perhaps a dark-hued Nubian.”84 Another told how the Barnum & Bailey Moors and Algerians “gave exhaustive illustration of Arab life in fierce fights and unique dances, and then silently folded their tents and stole away into the dressing rooms.”85 After establishing its Ethnological Congress
as an authentic scientific sampling of the Orient, the circus saw its Orientals being read through like their brown-face counterparts a decade earlier in the Congress of Nations. The Barnum & Bailey Circus of the late 1880s and early 1890s ultimately encouraged such interpretations by staging the meeting of East and West primarily in terms of Hippodromesque pageantry and fantasy rather than science. It was a trend that would culminate with the show’s giant productions of Imre Kiralfy’s spectacles, Nero; or, The Destruction of Rome and Columbus and the Discovery of America. As in the Hippodrome, these spectacles filled arenas with thousands of performers who enacted allegories of imperial power.

In a country that would continue to nourish racist anthropological theory for at least another half century, Barnum & Bailey’s turn to spectacle in the showman’s last years may tell us more about the form’s patrons than about its contents. This was the period in which, once and for all, children emerged as the circus’s implied audience. In 1884 the Ethnological Congress could still imagine male professionals as a primary audience of its exotic nonwhites, but by the end of the decade the East was more likely to be represented for juvenile patrons in the shape of a pony float of Bluebeard or Sinbad. Barnum & Bailey’s new Orientalist narratives and images preserved the racial ideologies of the earlier Barnum shows, but in a form so mediated by legend and fantasy as to cut down dramatically on the possibility of oppositional interpretation. U.S. social hierarchies might have become a bone of contention in the Hippodrome, and the Ethnological Congress may have implicitly questioned the West’s fetishism of science and capitalism, but by the time of Barnum’s death, his show was more interested in turning politics into spectacle than in acknowledging the politics of its spectacles.

Conclusion
“A Transient Disease”: Barnumism at the World’s Columbian Exposition

Although he had been dead for two years when it opened in May 1893, P. T. Barnum was very much a presence at the Chicago World’s Columbian Exposition. The culminating U.S. cultural event of the nineteenth century, the fair drew more than ten million visitors to its temporary White City of exhibition halls erected on marshlands south of Chicago. U.S. visitors responded to the fair in wildly divergent ways, some hailing it as a symbol of their nation’s cultural and industrial preeminence, others attacking it as an exercise in racism and elitism. One thing shared by friends and foes of the exposition, however, was a tendency to invoke the name of the nation’s greatest showman. Barnum’s prominence in discourses about the fair amply suggests his legacy for U.S. culture. It was perhaps inevitable that the showman haunt an event so intent on containing, and even denying, the lessons of his career.

The obvious place to look for Barnum at the World’s Columbian Exposition was in the commercial amusements, most of which were crowded onto the Midway Plaisance—the mile-long street of theaters, shops, restaurants, and rides adjacent to the White City. Aside from the giant Ferris wheel, the midway’s main attraction was its collection of ethnological villages, which featured natives of various lands, including Ireland, Algeria, Dahomey, Germany, Java, and Egypt. Fairgoers could ogle Algerian dancers, dine on Berlin cuisine to the accompaniment of a German army band, and ride camels and donkeys through the “Streets of Cairo.” The direct inspiration of the midway’s villages was the colonial
city of Africans and Asians at the 1889 Paris Exposition (Rydell 55–56), but the New York Times acknowledged another antecedent when it dubbed the midway the "Greatest Show on Earth." The midway's blend of anthropology and popular culture owed an obvious debt to Barnum's circuses. The fierce Dahomeyans, the sensual Egyptians, and the athletic Moors all had forebears in his shows. One reporter acknowledged the connection when he concluded his tour of the villages with the observation: "The late P. T. Barnum should have lived to see this day." 

Ironically, when the midway echoed Barnum's Orientalism, it was defying his advice. Three years before the exposition opened, Barnum had responded to a request from the North American Review with an article titled "What the Fair Should Be." It lauded the antiracist potential of world's fairs, crediting the 1850 London Exposition with overcoming Europeans' prejudices against Turks and Chinese, and predicting an even greater "broadening effect upon the popular mind" from the Chicago exposition. But the midway concessionaires opted instead for the lucrative narrowing effect of Barnum-esque racial primitives. It was a choice that would be repeated over the following decades throughout the nation's popular culture. As the United States took its place among the major imperial powers, dark-skinned "savages" from hot spots like China and the Philippines would show up in jingoistic spectacles at amusement parks, world's fair midways, and circuses. Fairgoers could glimpse the future of U.S. popular culture a few blocks away from the exposition at Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show. For its 1893 season, the Wild West Show had added a new attraction clearly inspired by Barnum: the Congress of Rough Riders of the World, also billed as "A Kindergarten of Anthropology." Buffalo Bill Cody's vaqueros, gauchos, Cossacks, and Indians were targeted to connoisseurs of horsemanship as well as students "of human progress, of racial peculiarities, of national characteristics" (Buffalo 33). In the decades after the World's Columbian Exposition, cultural entrepreneurs would increasingly follow Barnum in measuring American "progress" against the "racial peculiarities" of subject peoples.

Few fairgoers would have been surprised to spot Barnum's ghost at the Wild West Show or on the midway, but when it drifted into the fair's most rarefied cultural spaces, many of them were appalled. During the first three months of the exposition, Barnum-esque amusements were banned from the high-culture fantasyland that was the White City. The collaboration of the nation's most prominent artists and architects produced an exposition of unprecedented scale, order, and, to some eyes at least, beauty. For U.S. highbrows, the fair was a cultural collaboration that rivaled the Renaissance (Burg 79). The White City proved a bit too elitist for many Americans, however. In July, the directors of the World's Fair corporation claimed liabilities of more than a million dollars, which they largely attributed to poor attendance and costly, unpopular classical music. They responded by adapting the exposition to a middlebrow audience: after canceling orchestral and choral concerts, they instituted a series of outdoor amusements, which brought midway performers into the White City for international concerts, multiracial swimming matches in the Great Basin, and an Indian "torture dance," in which performers submitted to mutilation. These controversial changes were commonly known—among proponents and opponents alike—as "barnumising the Fair." The strategy swelled attendance, but incensed critics. The Chicago Tribune complained that the directors had "dispensed with the highest form of the highest art upon the theory that the people must be amused." Such attacks did not forestall the barnumization of subsequent U.S. world's fairs. From Atlanta (1895), to Nashville (1897), to Omaha (1898), to Buffalo (1901), to St. Louis (1904), midway amusements absorbed a steadily increasing share of the money and patronage flowing into U.S. expositions (Nasaw 68–71). Many Americans clearly valued the fairs not for their artistic and scientific exhibitions, but for their pop cultural innovations: it was on the midway that an enormous cross-class public got its first taste of such amusements as the nickelodeon and the roller coaster (Nasaw 72).

According to Charles Dudley Warner, it was not just the nation's expositions that were being barnumized. The famous novelist/critic delivered a sweeping indictment of U.S. culture during a session of the Literature Congress held in conjunction with the Chicago fair. Decrying the absence of a tradition of literary criticism in the United States, Warner traced the roots of the problem to a uniquely American combination of cultural and social ills, among them superficiality, boastfulness, and "a disregard of
moral as well as of artistic values and standards.” Having identified the plague, Warner attempted to classify it in terms popularized by Matthew Arnold: “[T]his is not Philistinism. I am sure, also, that it is not the final expression of the American spirit, that which will represent its life or its literature. I trust it is a transient disease, which we may perhaps call by a transient name,—Barnumism.” Warner should have known better than to call Barnumism “transient.” By 1893, four decades of U.S. highbrows had employed the name of P. T. Barnum to attack what they saw as dishonest, immoral, and crass in U.S. culture. Nor would the “disease” fade. At the end of the twentieth century, the showman’s name remains a powerful epithet among critics who use it much the same as did Warner. Their invocation of Barnum is perhaps the best indication of the breadth and duration of the showman’s cultural impact. Though not perhaps the final expression of the American spirit, Barnumism is surely a lasting one.

Notes

The following abbreviations are used throughout the notes as well as in citations in the text:

- CWM Robert L. Parkinson Library and Research Center at the Circus World Museum
- HI Home Journal [New York]
- HTC Harvard Theatre Collection
- Life The Life of P. T. Barnum
- NYAtlas New York Atlas
- NYClip New York Clipper
- NYH New York Herald
- NYSun New York Sun
- NYT New York Times
- NYTrib New York Tribune
- PTB P. T. Barnum: The Legend and the Man, by A. H. Saxon
- SL Selected Letters of P. T. Barnum, edited by A. H. Saxon
- ST Struggles and Triumphs

Introduction: “E Pluribus Barnum”

1. Barnum’s career on New York’s working-class Bowery is explored in Buckley chap. 6 and Lott 72, 76, 112, 228. On Barnum’s ties to the middle class, see Allen Horrible 64–71 and McConachie Melodramatic chap. 6.
2. HJ 26 Oct. 1850.

1. “All Things to All People”: P. T. Barnum in American Culture

2. Barnum Struggles and Triumphs (1882) 328. Henceforth, the 1869 edition of Struggles and Triumphs will be cited in the text as ST, and later editions will be identified by date, for example, ST 1882, 328.
3. Biographer A. H. Saxon deserves credit for identifying and analyzing Barnum’s Atlas publications (PTB chaps. 5–7). It is important to note that my own sense of Adventures remains fragmentary, as I have been unable to locate copies.