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Micah Childress

LIFE BEYOND THE BIG TOP: AFRICAN AMERICAN AND FEMALE CIRCUSFOLK, 1860–1920

Abstract
At the turn of the twentieth century, most Americans celebrated the arrival of a circus. Circus Day had become a local holiday that brought together ethnicities, races, and classes (of both genders) that did not usually assemble at the same place and time. Within the circus itself, however, race and gender provided boundaries and fostered acrimony. The racism and segregation of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries could be found aboard any circus train and throughout every show lot. African Americans were relegated to certain jobs, segregated within those jobs, and usually paid less than their white counterparts. The show's scheduled route often took them into areas in which they experienced the racial volatility typical of the era. Although the public perception of circus employment often produced thoughts of travel and fun adventures, African American circusfolk endured harsh treatment, low pay, and vile racism.

For African Americans, the work environment at a circus reflected the national social atmosphere, but female circus employees encountered conditions that most other women were not afforded. Indeed, female employees were confined to one or two train cars and lived under specific rules about when (or even if) they could entertain guests. Yet circus employment provided women with the ability to leave the restraints of the home during the height of Victorian domesticity, as well as the even rarer opportunity to outearn their male counterparts. Moreover, employment under the big top gave circuswomen a public platform to advocate for suffrage.

In 1892, Benjamin Wallace's show, exhibiting under the name of Cook & Whitby, boarded the show's train and departed Prairie du Chien, Wisconsin. En route to Maquoketa, Iowa, in the dead of night, a defective axle broke on the forward truck of the first car, derailing it and the four cars that followed. One of the derailed cars contained a band of African American musicians who had been bunking in the same car as some of the show's performing horses. Fourteen of the car's horses perished in the wreck, while all but one or two band members escaped with their lives. When the show's manager discovered the disparity in the rate of attrition between the horses and the musicians, he "rushed about the wreck with tears in his eyes, shouting 'Just think of it! My fourteen best horses killed and every one of those darkies saved!'" For circus employees, facing danger or even death occurred on a daily basis. But for blacks and women who earned their paychecks from the nineteenth century's most widely attended amusement, racial discrimination, gendered regulations, and behavioral stipulations accompanied the ever-present risk of physical harm.[1]

Micah Childress, Grand Valley State University; email: childrem@gvsu.edu

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The racism and segregation in the turn-of-the-century American landscape could be found aboard circus trains and throughout every show lot. Outside of the rare black performer or member of an ethnic display, black men were generally given positions of manual labor, and shows did not hire African American women. Historians have examined African Americans in the nineteenth-century entertainment industry—from minstrel shows to vaudeville acts—but the focus often shifts to white perceptions and portrayals of African American culture through blackface. But what of the black men who worked behind the scenes to help produce the century's most patronized entertainment? Circus employment presents a unique vantage point to observe and understand working conditions for blacks because the traveling shows were parts rural and urban, agricultural and industrial. Circus life may have presented blacks with a prospective occupation at a time when employment opportunities were largely limited to sharecropping or domestic service, but they were unable to escape the racism or informal segregation that later emerged on a national scale after the Great Migration of the late 1910s and 1920s. Decades before a million African Americans left their rural farms in hopes of finding urban employment, black circusmen were relegated to certain jobs, segregated within those jobs, and usually paid less than their white colleagues.[2]

White women who worked for circuses, however, encountered conditions that most other women were not afforded. On the one hand, Euro American female employees were only hired as performers (never involved in manual labor), segregated into specific train cars, and lived under specific rules about when or even if they could entertain guests. On the other hand, circus employment provided these women with the ability to leave the confines of the home, as well as the even rarer opportunity to outearn their male counterparts. The historical focus on white female performers has often revolved around the link between the performances and sexuality (in contrast to Victorian norms), but the job itself spoke volumes. Observers began to associate accomplishments in the ring with the suffrage movement. Some performers used the opportunity as a call to action for other women to become politically active.

By examining black circusmen and white circuswomen together, it is evident that two groups, both marginalized from the general turn-of-the-century workforce, encountered a different set of experiences in the entertainment world as showfolk: white women took on and often embraced circumstances that ran counter to national trends in several ways, while black circusmen endured the restrictive conditions that eventually permeated steel mills and automobile factories.[3]

"HORSES BETTER THAN NEGROES": AFRICAN AMERICAN CIRCUS WORKERS

Writing about the cosmopolitan nature of his show's dressing room in 1895, Alfred Ringling explained that one could hear nearly "every language of the civilized globe" in the show's tents because the employees came from "every quarter of the world." He continued, "Here the Japanese and the German, the Frenchman and the Swede, the Englishman and the Turk are all liberally sprinkled among the simon-pure Americans, all on terms of equality and good fellowship." Indeed, performers may have embraced a degree of cultural diversity, but African Americans did not fall under any such umbrella of acceptance.[4]

The circus industry's general exclusion of African Americans from the roles of kinkers (originally specific to acrobats, the term eventually applied to any performer) was crucial in white American kinkers not extending a level of equality, which they afforded to a majority of their international counterparts (save for Africans and Australian aborigines). Contortionists and acrobats from Asia and the Middle East not only performed in the show, they headlined on showbills, were paid well, and were treated in a similar manner to their white counterparts, who provided funds to aid in their recovery from injury and welcomed them as participants in Independence Day celebrations. Almost no circuses featured any African Americans in the main performance, although shows often had a handful of white men that performed in blackface. The few African American performers were relegated to the sideshow tent and generally given the duty to depict an African or a monkey-man combination (starting with Barnum's "What Is It?" in his American Museum in 1860). Denied the avenue of performance in the main tent, blacks found it nearly impossible to obtain equal treatment. The familial aspect of circus-folk culture extended to international performers, but white circusmen remained in step with most white Americans in regard to the discrimination of black Americans.[5]

Because circuses almost never employed black performers, shows that did hire African Americans relegated them to lesser duties. Circus culture placed owners, performers, and managers at the top of the social pyramid. Laborers were separated from their betters by a wide chasm, as almost no middle class existed. Within the category of general laborer, circus management and circus culture placed blacks at the bottom. In an 1889 woodcut in *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper* (*FLIN*), two black employees and eleven white employees are seen in a depiction of a circus's cook tent. Of the twelve individuals depicted, four white men do not appear to be actively engaged in labor—one man even crosses his legs and leans against a guy rope. Only one other white man wears an apron similar to both black employees, but he is in a supervisory role over the black gentleman on the far right. The picture's other black employee carries food (possibly a finished product), indicating his status as a waiter. Another woodcut depicts a similar scene—two black men work in menial positions while a nearby white man observes and relaxes (even if only for a moment). By placing African Americans in the lowest subdivisions of labor within the larger general laborer pool, shows ensured that they had the cheapest labor possible.[6]

After the first Great Migration, in which hundreds of thousands of black southerners made their way to urban centers (usually in the north, often to filling the openings left by whites when the United States entered the First World War), many blacks discovered that they were excluded from certain jobs, and any employment they found was often at a lower wage than their white counterparts. The trend of exclusion, segregation, and salary discrimination was evident within popular entertainment long before the demographic-altering shift in black population. At the same time that a few Gilded Age industries used African American workers to bust strikes or lower wages, white circus laborers had similar concerns about their troupe hiring blacks. If circus management, which had literally thrown employees off a moving train rather than pay their salaries (a process known as "redlighting"), could substitute any white worker in favor of cheaper black laborers, then the white circusmen would worry about job security, wage levels, and the meaningfulness of his task. In fact, James Bailey resisted hiring blacks because he thought his labor force would perceive black laborers as economic threats.[7]

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Although Bailey and the Ringlings mimicked many industrial leaders in the Gilded Age by not hiring African Americans, most other shows did hire blacks. The route books (books typically authored by a show's treasurer or manager that listed employees as well as a diary of daily events) for significant shows such as Forepaugh, Sells, Forepaugh-Sells, Wallace, Main, and John Robinson all make mention of black employees or contain pictures of black brigades. Based on the few existing Gilded Age images, circuses most frequently integrated (although not with any discernable equity) the cookhouse. Otherwise, in only one instance did management *not* segregate the working groups: John Robinson's 1899 route book contains a picture of black and white scenery men (in charge of moving set pieces) sitting side by side. That image appears to be an anomaly, not only in the circus world but also for the Robinson troupe, which divided its canvasmen: a "White Brigade" for the big top, while the "Colored Brigade" erected tents with less prestige (the sideshow, menagerie, cookhouse, and other tents).[8]

Shows typically employed blacks as cooks, waiters, porters, roustabouts, and hostlers (stable boys). By giving blacks the most subservient positions within the lowest division of labor, circus management not only procured the cheapest labor possible, they also avoided angering their white employees. This is one of the reasons employers outside of amusement often refused to promote or hire blacks beyond the lowest positions. In the Gilded Age, if African Americans could secure work, their employers limited them to certain tasks. In the railroad industry, for example, whites deliberately barred blacks from moving beyond the post of porter (and denied them access to the various railway unions). Some African Americans, especially women, found it difficult to obtain employment outside of domestic service, even in urban areas.[9]

White circusmen had reason to keep a watchful eye on the labor tactics of management, but racial discrimination gave black employees an additional cause for concern. Ten black circusmen in John Robinson's show sued him for back pay in June of 1882. Because no whites sued and the show did not bust (go bankrupt), allegedly shorting these men's paychecks may have been racially motivated. Robinson had originally offered the men twenty dollars a month (between two-thirds and three-quarters of what their white counterparts made), but Robinson had only been giving them ten or fifteen dollars monthly, and owed the men $350 collectively. It is possible that part (if not most) of the contested dollars came from "holdback"—a process in which management withheld part of the contractual salary, with the remainder of the funds being distributed in a lump sum at season's end. Originally designed to provide the show with enough capital to start a season (as wages consumed about 40 percent of a show's expenses), the practice eventually revolved around employee control (sobriety, punctuality, delinquency, belligerency) and retention (the turnover rate for unskilled positions was high, and the departure of a marquee act would harm ticket sales). The judge thought the case had merit and ordered the seizure of some of Robinson's property. Robinson agreed to pay the bond for the equipment, but he tried to persuade the judge to accept bond payment without forcing him to compensate his ex-employees. The judge rejected Robinson's attempt, but only made him pay $132 in addition to the bond—more than $200 short of what the aggrieved employees claimed.[10]

The road to court-based compensation in the nineteenth century was "long, hard, and full of obstacles," according to one legal historian. Indeed, legal action from white circusfolk—kinker or roustabout (laborers)—who had not been paid in full or had been injured was

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extremely rare, so the practice of circuses shorting its black employees surely extended beyond the Robinson show. The holdback stipulation was typically part of the signed contract, so the fact that the judge not only heard the case but ordered Robinson to pay at least part of the amount suggests that there may have been more to the dispute than back pay.[11]

Because Gilded Age legal culture tilted so heavily in favor of the defendant, circus employees had to take care of themselves as a group. They took up special collections for injured performers or bereaved employees toward the top of the labor ladder, but in the last decade of the nineteenth century they formed mutual aid organizations. Membership dues were collected at the season's outset and a weekly fee of twenty-five cents was required. The treasurer then collected the money and handed out small amounts as a prototypical short-term workman's compensation (management typically deducted pay for work missed). Most of the organizations only accepted performers (male and female), but in 1896, the Sells-Forepaugh society removed such restrictions on its membership. However, the dues alone, at roughly one-tenth of a general laborer's monthly salary, almost surely prohibited membership by default. Additionally, it is likely that black circusmen would have been barred from obtaining membership (like many contemporary labor unions). They were, in many ways, on their own.[12]

The mutual aid societies in the circus represented a larger turn-of-the-century trend, as mutualism (and fraternalism) expanded, from societies for Jewish immigrants (typically comprised by arrivals from Germany, Bohemia, and Russia) to the Loyal Order of the Moose. Generally excluded from these organizations, blacks often formed their own fraternal lodges or mutual aid societies. The Ladies Friends of Faith Benevolent Association, a mutual aid society for black women, provided its members with funds for medical needs. In some instances, African American associations built and maintained their own hospitals. Basically barred from entering the ranks of performers and typically relegated to the lowest-paying and least-skilled labor practically precluded black circusmen from the funds they needed to form and operate their own mutual aid societies.[13]

Several decades before the Great Migration, circus employment offered an alternative to the rural, Southern, sharecropping life in which a majority of African Americans were contractually confined. Several traveling companies began to hire segregated labor units of blacks in the penultimate decade of the nineteenth century. Not only did black circusfolk travel well beyond the boundaries of the former Confederacy, they worked in an environment that resembled the factories from which they were often excluded. As circuses shifted away from wagons to rail transport, a factory-like division of labor emerged. Instead of a pool of laborers on whom management relied for the completion of various jobs, entire sets of employees were grouped around single tasks: big top canvasmen, sideshow canvasmen, tent-pole men, razorbacks (cage men who loaded and unloaded animals from the train), teamsters (wagon drivers), and so forth. Management preferred the factory-like division and subdivisions of labor. W. W. Cole, proprietor and one-time partner in the Barnum & London show, expressed his approval of the organized and efficient workforce. "Should the slightest cog get out of order," Cole said, "there is a jar throughout the entire system." After witnessing the division of labor in action as the Greatest Show on Earth constructed and deconstructed its fabulous lot, one reporter commented on its likeness to "a well oiled machine." "Each man," he continued, "has something to do and it is done quietly, at the proper moment, and done well."[14]

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In another nod to the emerging industrial system of labor that necessitated an increase in the managerial class to meet technological innovation and rising consumer demands, shows expanded their managerial class to oversee the newly divided gangs of workers. "As in a good factory," Cole explained, "every department must have its proper head." Big shows had general managers and directors that oversaw managers of separate departments, under whom there might also be bosses or superintendents. For showmen like Cole, competent managers made all the difference, especially as the new managers increased the buffer between owners and workers.[15]

General laborers comprised the most poorly paid element of the circus workforce. In the 1830s, circuses paid canvasmen fifteen dollars per month, plus room and board. By the 1880s, the pay for white working men increased, but only by a few dollars. Black roustabouts were undoubtedly paid on a scale closer to that of the 1830s. The seasonal nature of their employment further complicated matters for general laborers. Performers and managers, paid rather handsomely, could either put enough away until the following season or find work in vaudeville theaters or opera houses. Certain managers and skilled circus workers often found employment at the show's winter quarters, but unskilled laborers were not afforded the same chances at off-season employment, either by the circus or other entertainment institutions. "The Lord only knows where they go to in the winter," one boss canvasman confessed when asked about his employees. Year-round employment for blue-collar workers in a number of industries was rare, as they routinely experienced long periods of downtime, but for the African American roustabouts who faced job discrimination in and out of show business, the off-season did not provide reprieve from the tough life of a black circusman.[16]

Show ownership and management often disregarded the concerns (and the names) of white roustabouts, and its proprietors and department heads had an even more calloused relationship with their black employees. The 1883 Forepaugh route book detailed the account of an equestrienne's injured horse and then followed that up with the simple sentence: "A colored waiter in cook tent fell dead on lot." Route book authors (usually members of management) sometimes admitted that they did not know names of workingmen, partially because of the high turnover rate within that subdivision of labor, but also because neither the author nor performer had reason for personal contact with canvasmen in a railroad circus with its factory-like division of labor. Waiters served food to the upper echelon three times a day, indicating that the lack of name or further details about the dead waiter likely stemmed from racism rather than a lack of personal interaction. That sentiment seems doubly true for black roustabouts. While unloading the Sells Brothers Circus in Petersburg, Virginia, the razorbacks lost control of a wagon, which "ran back, knocking down a nigger … crushing in his chest and ribs," and he died the following day. That the author failed to note the deceased's occupation indicates that the man in question was on the bottom rung of the ladder, both socioeconomically and racially.[17]

The Wallace manager's reported comments after the 1892 train wreck in this essay's introduction typifies how management viewed black employees, a view summed up in a Chicago newspaper's article: "Horses Better Than Negroes." In total, twenty-six horses died in the accident. Wallace's hometown paper reported the loss of the horses at $5,000. At around $192 each, the horses had either been premier draft stock or low-level performing stock. The fortuitous African Americans comprised

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Wallace's sideshow band, which was the highest paid circus occupation that nineteenth-century blacks could obtain. At eight dollars a week, each sideshow band member would have earned $192 for a six-month season. It is unlikely that the manager had done the math instantaneously, but his exclamation—even before reducing both parties to a simple dollar amount—indicates the type of environment in which African American circusmen operated.[18]

Music was the only performing area into which blacks made consistent headway. Several shows featured a sideshow band comprised entirely of African Americans. Forepaugh-Sells simply dubbed theirs "The Sideshow Band," but most shows kept with the circus tradition of flashy and vibrant names: Walter L. Main's circus carried Prof. J. O. McNutt's Colored Band, and the Great Wallace Show featured C. W. Jones's Black Huzzar Band. Nearly every circus had a black sideshow band. Their presence became so expected, in fact, that no self-proclaimed big show traveled without a black band. In contrast with black laborers, black musicians were in such high demand (and, apparently, in low supply compared to whites) that Gollmar's show paid members of its black sideshow band ten dollars per week, while doling out eight to ten dollars weekly to its white band members. Although show proprietors recognized that black bands had become a part of circusgoers's expectations, the bands existed as part of the sideshow.[19]

It seems only two Gilded Age shows had black kinkers in the main tent, both of whom were riders. In 1899, John Robinson's route book lists Negro Lewis as one of its "very best riders," claiming that he was "the only colored man of note in the business" in the 1870s. Barnum & London's 1885 route book recorded a black jockey (J. Ross) in its hippodrome races, but Ross's name is missing from the following year's list of riders. Barnum's 1885 show stayed almost exclusively in the New-England and the Mid-Atlantic states (with a few weeks in Canada), but the 1886 iteration spent significant time in Maryland, Virginia, Kentucky, Tennessee, Georgia, and the Carolinas. Barnum & London management may have thought that an African American hippodrome racer might not be received well in the former slave states and dispensed with Ross. The lack of black kinkers is consistent with larger economic trends during the era, as blacks were also underrepresented in positions of professional, business, clerical, and skilled labor.[20]

Ephraim ("Eph") Williams and Ephraim ("Eph") Thompson both exceeded the show business accomplishments of Negro Lewis and J. Ross. The circus provided Williams with an avenue out of the service industry (shoeshine and hotel porter), the main employment sector for urban blacks because most factories refused to hire African Americans. As the self-proclaimed "black Barnum," Williams ran a small railroad show in the late 1880s and early 1890s. He had trained animals to perform as if they could understand and complete math problems (similar to antebellum clown Dan Rice) and had been able to expand into a traveling troupe. Details on his shows are sparse, save for the fact that they went bankrupt (twice), just like Rice's shows had done a generation earlier. Perhaps the most impressive feat Williams ever accomplished was not an animal act or a magic trick: he employed whites. To be sure, the Ringlings, Barnums, and Forepaughs of the show world dwarfed his fifteen-car troupe, but many of his twenty-six employees were white. Based out of Wisconsin, Williams—or Prof. Williams as his marquee often proclaimed—played mostly in the Midwest

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to enough people to keep his show on the road for about a decade. Despite the show's relative success, the *Wisconsin Weekly Advocate*, Milwaukee's African American newspaper, scolded their counterparts for their failure "to do Prof. Williams justice." But after his second bust, he restyled himself as "Silas Green from New Orleans" and toured the South with an all-black revue to mostly black audiences. Thompson, an animal trainer with the Forepaugh show in the late 1880s, remained in the shadow of Addie Forepaugh. Possibly frustrated by his lack of exposure (presumably due to the color of his skin), Thompson departed America and found renown as an elephant trainer in Europe.[21]

The racial tension between white and black circusfolk was a milder representation of what was taking place on the larger scale across the United States. All circus employees witnessed racial hostility—and its violent consequences—in the nineteenth century's final decades. Traveling across the country by train, circuses wandered through states and entire regions on a monthly basis. Due to their itinerant lifestyle, showfolk had the opportunity to witness racial interaction regionally and throughout the country on an annual basis—a vantage point most Americans did not have. Gil Robinson was with his father's show in Franklin, Tennessee, when the Ku Klux Klan kidnapped a white man for conducting land-office business with blacks. The Klan shot the man, tied him to his horse, and sent the horse back into town. In Du Quoin, Illinois, in 1892, Ringling employees watched "one of the local 'white trash'" shoot a "town darkey." Three years later, a similar scene took place in Marion, South Carolina, as Bob Hunting's troupe witnessed a white man shoot one of Marion's black policemen.[22]

The author of the Sells route book called their encounter with racial violence in North Carolina "the most eventful day" of their 1883 season. According to the author, "a nigger was shot at a nigger 'shindig'" before the show's arrival, but the body still lay near the lot. Sometime during the evening (likely after the matinee but before the evening show), another black man was shot, but no explanation was offered. Tensions boiled over again after the evening exhibition. A fight between locals broke out, and "a coon by the name of J. Campbell shot and killed a white man." About two in the morning, a mob of whites rushed the jail and lynched Campbell.[23]

As the *New York Times* explained, "Persons who travel with the circuses have a splendid opportunity to study human nature." Showfolk, no doubt, witnessed human nature near both its zenith and nadir on Circus Day. The Sells troupers had witnessed a lynching typical of the era: a mob of white vigilantes subverting the rule of law and carrying out their will in front of spectators. The Gilded Age and Progressive Era combined to form, as Richard M. Perloff deems the period, the "heyday" of lynching. Of the 3,244 Americans lynched between 1889 and 1918, 2,522 (78 percent) were African American. After an "assault upon a white boy by a burly negro" in Falls City, Nebraska, in 1898, the Forepaugh-Sells show heard "talk of lynching," but the child regained consciousness, and the mob dispersed.[24]

Despite the fact that some circuses refused to hire blacks, or that other shows segregated their black employees and limited their opportunities, route books and newspapers reveal no intra-circus racial violence (although circusmen-on-townsfolk violence, and vice versa, was widely recorded). That is not to say that show business offered a workplace without discrimination, a guarantee of financial success, or an environment free from hateful speech and hurtful actions; but the circus provided a milder (albeit not benign) alternative

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to industrial employment and a more lucrative path than sharecropping—especially for skilled musicians.

"SO COURAGEOUS, SO SKILLFUL, AND SO STRONG": FEMALE CIRCUS EMPLOYEES

The recently combined Forepaugh-Sells show shouted about its newest performers in an 1896 advertisement: "Twentieth Century Damsels in New Arenic Roles. Leap-Year Ladies of Laughter, Lady Ringmasters … The Ring Whip in Fair, Ambitious Hands. Something the Whole Country is Talking About." Showmen sought those "fair, ambitious hands" for circus work, even if proprietors provided female presence more for the publicity and novelty than the proclaimed belief of fairness. Postbellum politicians had excluded women from the political sphere because most men (and some women) thought that female selflessness and purity would be tainted by politics. Eventually, several Republicans and northeastern evangelical middle-class women were joined by many Populist and Progressive Democrats, uniting behind the idea that the supposed female moral superiority was precisely why women should be included in the election process. Decades before women won the suffrage battle in the political arena, they challenged stereotypes through their performances under the big tent and their signatures on lucrative contracts. They formed formal organizations to support suffrage or to boost the number of domestic female kinkers. For circuswomen, show life typically offered a great degree of financial success and personal freedom, especially compared to their domestically based and factory-laboring counterparts.[25]

Though black men were typically confined to service positions and excluded from performing in a capacity beyond a brass band, shows employed white women almost exclusively as performers (although a few designed and constructed costumes). Canvaswomen, cook tent waitresses, and female razorbacks did not exist. Near the *fin de siècle*, circuses printed descriptions and pictures of their female stars (some of whom earned a higher salary than their male counterparts), but female performers had been almost nonexistent at the dawn of the nineteenth century. Antebellum equestriennes (along with child performers under the age of ten) amazed American audiences, but shows initially "deemphasized" their circuswomen or did not carry them because of legal restrictions in certain states that barred public exhibition of women. Even without any statutes, many Americans regarded a show featuring a female performer as impermissible entertainment and performing in public as questionable employment for women. Although the *Bucyrus (Ohio) Journal* commented in 1858 that one equestrienne had "enchanting" looks, the paper contended that the rider would be better served—and would better serve society—by taking up "a respectable calling." In some instances, proprietors were unable to hire or even find female performers due to their scarcity.[26]

Antebellum circuses carried with them a reputation for debauchery (drunkenness, foul language, prostitution), violence (fights and riots), and crime (theft, graft, and sometimes murder). Townsfolk were usually responsible for more than half of the immoral or illegal activity, but many Americans placed the blame squarely on the shoulders of circusmen. The infamy cost impresarios the coins and dollars of the upper and middle classes that eschewed the big top; working-class white males made up an overwhelming majority of the audience. The religious fervor produced by the Second Great Awakening at the

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outset of the nineteenth century and widespread by the 1820s and 1830s also contributed to the anti-circus sentiment, as many leaders implored their followers to avoid circuses because they created "a moral pestilence, to corrupt and destroy." One Wisconsin paper likened the circus to the biblical figure of Delilah, charging, "They shear us of our moral and pecuniary strength, as Samson was sheared of his hair."[27]

To counter this objection, many antebellum impresarios added a menagerie as its own exhibition (with its own tent), thus encouraging religious-minded individuals to observe God's creation. Although a ticket entitled the purchaser entry into the menagerie as well as the big top, those who wished could visit the animal tent and avoid the "demoralizing apparatus." Circuses had begun to capture, albeit partially, the middle and upper classes. After the Civil War, many showmen tried to improve the circus industry's reputation by eliminating or at least reducing many of the characteristics to which many Americans objected, thus following the example of P. T. Barnum and other proprietors. In the last three decades of the nineteenth century, the audiences ballooned, as men and women from all classes and races bought tickets for a seat under the big top.[28]

As the circus gained popularity and general acceptance during the Gilded Age, so too did circuswomen. The expansion in female employment in the circus reflected a national trend as the number of women in the workplace more than doubled from 1870 to 1910. During that same time frame, the percentage of female wage earners tripled in some American cities. Although shows still had many more male performers than female, circuses no longer battled legal restriction or a wave of moral consternation for featuring female kinkers. Whereas antebellum circuses might only feature a handful of circuswomen (if any at all), the route books for the largest Gilded Age circuses listed dozens of female kinkers—from funambulists to equestriennes.

Two women went beyond societal trends by working for themselves. Margaret Rice (nee Curran), divorced her famous clown husband, and ran her own show in the early 1860s. When she remarried and changed her last name, she continued to manage her own show, Mrs. Warner's Circus. In 1869, after proprietor William Lake was murdered while trying to prevent a nonpaying patron from entering his circus tent, his wife Agnes took "sole direction" of her husband's entertainment venture.[29]

As the number of female kinkers increased and were prominently displayed in advertisements, the press viewed and interpreted the prominence of female performers (and proprietors) through the lens of suffrage and the contemporary women's movement. "The advocates of Woman's [*sic*] Rights will find an especial pleasure in contemplating this circus," asserted South Dakota's *Yankton Press*, referring to a show's upcoming visit, "as its chief and head is Madame Agnes Lake." Perhaps advertisement dollars swayed the Yankton editors in 1871 (most shows purchased several pages of advertisements for weeks or even months in advance of a show, as well as often providing complimentary tickets to newspaper staff in exchange for a positive review or even publishing the press agent's "canned" review), but they praised Lake for handling her managerial responsibility "in a manner highly creditable"—a far cry from the *Bucyrus Journal*'s 1858 statement that a female should not be involved in circus work (the Bucyrus paper had also taken circus dollars for lavish ads and presumably the "comp" tickets, but remained critical nonetheless). Potential patrons, however, were evidently still cautious of a circus with a woman at its head. One Colorado paper, while positively portraying Lake's show, informed its readers that Levi North was Lake's general manager,

assuring the audience that North's presence served as "a sufficient guarantee of its worth."[30]

One contemporary suffragist directly linked circuswomen with other icons within the women's movement. At a circus in California in the early 1870s, Grace Greenwood (the penname of abolitionist Sarah Jane Lippincott) witnessed the feats of a few female performers. Tongue firmly planted in cheek, Greenwood wrote, "It was, to me, very dreadful—a revolting, almost ghastly exhibition of women's rights." She continued to poke fun, "An old-fashioned conservative could not have been more shocked when Elizabeth Blackwell went into medicine, and Antoinette Brown into divinity, than I was at seeing these women, in horrible undress, swinging and tumbling." Allowing her character's feigned indignation to slip for a moment, Greenwood declared, "It was something to see that women could be so courageous, so skillful, and so strong—could attain such steadiness of nerve and firmness of muscle."[31]

Greenwood was not alone in connecting circus performances and the women's movement. One Milwaukee paper did not fully support the women's movement (with the supposed "intrusive ambition" of its members), but a female kinker's prominent role in an English circus had convinced the author that "no business or profession can hope to hold out against the intrusive ambition of the strong-willed advocates of her sex's rights." Writing in *Harper's Weekly*, Eleonora Kinnicutt noted that several opponents to women's suffrage based their opposition on "the question of sex as a physical disability"—the physical inferiority of the fairer sex. Kinnicutt pointed to the female acrobat as evidence of physical capability, and she dismissed the idea that women were too weak to vote: "If women can work as hard as they do at almost every employment in life from factory loom to circus trapeze, the argument of feminine weakness, as applied to the mere duty of depositing votes, seems more obstructionary than forcible." Most Americans had not witnessed the labor of female factory workers, but the feats of circuswomen amazed millions on an annual basis.[32]

Showmen, ever eager to take advantage of a trend or a topic that created a buzz among the public, publicized the connection between the women's movement and their female performers. "As in the political, literary, equestrian and gymnastic world, women are constantly coming to the front," a Forepaugh advertisement trumpeted in 1888, and their performer "Carazo" was evidence of that. Three years later, the Greatest Show on Earth boasted that it possessed the "most daring, original and accomplished equestriennes" in show business. Barnum & Bailey proclaimed that "grace, beauty, youth, perfection, bravery" were "all perfectly displayed" by their equestriennes in the "most intrepid and daring bareback feats ever beheld anywhere." Not only could Barnum's lady riders outperform those of other shows, they could do it while maintaining their physical attractiveness.[33]

In the mid-1890s, the trend of publicizing leading circuswomen continued with the emergence of the so-called New Woman in American society. Despite the denunciation of the New Woman in various circles (most notably, among physicians and intellectuals) as a "danger to traditional notions of domestic propriety" due to her propensity to embrace higher education or paid labor over the home's private sphere, circuses briefly embraced her for show purposes. In 1896, Barnum & Bailey claimed that they had "not one, but many" examples of "the New Woman in bloomers … [all] in the rings at one time." The Greatest Show on Earth boasted of "lady clowns, lady ringmasters, lady object

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holders, lady equestrians, manege [*sic*] performers and arenic experts," who "ride horses astride in bifurcated skirts." Barnum & Bailey featured the New Circuswoman (to coin a term) in her various roles in each ring at the same time, which the show program described as "a positive usurpation of the ring in which man has no part." The program deemed the display a "novel and picturesque exhibition of the assertion of the rights of the twentieth century [*sic*] girl into a place in the circus." According to one newspaper, the New Circuswoman display was a "decided hit" in Barnum's opening week in New York City's Madison Square Garden, but not every onlooker thought similarly. Taking issue with the broader cultural implications of female fooling, a Kansas editor seemed repulsed by the "ridiculousness" of the act, calling it "shocking." In Boston, the *Daily Advertiser* rejected the entire idea of a woman clown by positing that thinking about a woman trying to be funny was the only comical part of the act. "She didn't try hard enough," the editor surmised, "or tried too hard, or tried wrong, and she was not a bit funny."[34]

Despite the rejection by a few papers, the audiences must have responded, because Walter L. Main show copied Barnum by featuring its own New Circuswomen display the following year: two equestriennes, two ring mistresses, a female clown, and "object holders dressed in velvet and satin bloomers." The Main show contended that no act existed in which women did not "equal or excel their male companions." Perhaps exaggerating slightly (but decidedly reserved hyperbole by circus advertisement standards), the Main show argued, "The real 'new woman' is not the intellectual character depicted by the Susan B. Anthony-Cady Stanton school, but rather a woman of physical culture … in the circus ring."[35]

"The circus business," explained iron-jaw performer Mlle. Pontin, "is one in which a woman gets as much wages as a man." Women represented one of the Gilded Age's cheapest forms of labor (alongside children), and the wage disparity between the sexes could be quite large. However, not only could circuswomen earn the same salary as a circusman, prominent female performers even outearned their male colleagues. Although Elise Dockrill may not have taken home $1,000 in cash every week, her salary and benefits added up to that advertised amount, making her just one of a handful of circus performers, regardless of gender, to attain such a lofty salary in the nineteenth century. At a time when the average American worker earned a dollar or two per day, Dockrill's troupe advertised the thousand-dollar amount not only as a portrayal of her talents, but also to create a sensation among the public. In the sideshow, tattooed women outearned their male counterparts by as much as $15 per week, while a female dwarf could garner up to $35 more per week than male dwarves. One show's female dwarf married a fellow circus employee ("an ordinary-sized man"), and an observer alleged that she "rules him with an iron rod by constantly threatening to get a divorce." The man, in turn, bent to her wishes because "she brings him a considerable annual income by exhibiting herself," and a divorce was "the last thing he would wish her to do." Ballet girls, hired by the dozens if not the hundreds, serve as the outlier, as they earned about $7 per week as opposed to the $10 to $15 that secondary male performers earned. When room and board are added to that seven-dollar figure, the female performers were still earning higher wages than women in factory or retail work.[36]

Rather than remain content with the press's association between female performers and the women's movement, some circuswomen became active suffragists in the early part of the twentieth century. At the outset of the 1912 season, female kinkers in the

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Greatest Show on Earth formed Barnum & Bailey's Circus Women's Equal Rights Society. The group elected officers, and the new leadership changed the group's name to the Suffragette Ladies of the Barnum & Bailey Circus (SLBBC). Claiming to have 800 members (which would only have been accurate if circuswomen from other shows joined up, but the number is probably a severe overestimation because only 25 women attended the group's first meeting), the group met with Elizabeth Cook of the Women's Political Union. Cook praised the group, saying, "There is no class of women who show better that they have a right to vote than circus women, who twice a day prove that they have the courage and endurance of men." Cook may have been drawn to the idea of supporting a group that featured famous females and traveled from town to town across the country, which provided the group with "perfect opportunities for further proselytizing." Josie De Mott, an equestrienne in the Greatest Show on Earth, and the SLBBC's president, told its members, "You earn salaries … Some of you have property. You have a right to say what shall be done with it." During the same decade that ballet girls faced the strictest set of regulations, circuswomen united in order to fight for rights that extended well beyond sleeping cars and canvas tents. Several shows had tried to capitalize on the New Woman in their 1890s acts, but this next iteration, which was more directly political, did not make its way under the big top. However, there is no evidence that circuses tried to suppress the SLBBC or any other female political organization, so in that way circuses offered tacit approval. In fact, the proprietors may have viewed this as yet another opportunity for free publicity.[37]

The newfound fame—and, for some, fortune— of female kinkers in the Gilded Age and Progressive Era did not automatically result in equal treatment. Circuses typically had a second set of rules specifically for their female employees. The rare itinerant antebellum shows that carried female performers were rumored to have prostitutes or, at the very least, loose women (part of this belief stems from the regular existence of prostitution in theaters until the 1850s). The fact that multiple antebellum circuses used coded language to inform prospective patrons that no prostitutes (referred to as "improper persons" or occupants of the "third row") traveled with the show suggests that antebellum circuses may have contained "the occasional prostitute" (to attract potential johns).[38]

In order to ensure acceptability by the middle class and religious minded, shows kept a more watchful eye on and dictated stricter codes of behavior for their female employees. Alluding to the history of prostitution in antebellum theaters, one Chicago newspaper visited an unnamed circus in the 1880s and informed the public (probably without the intended pun) that management erected "almost impregnable safeguards" around "women who earn their livelihood in circuses, differing widely in this respect from the conditions met with on the stage." Several circuses kept watch outside the tent in which circuswomen changed before and during a performance as well as their sleeping cars. In 1883, the Forepaugh show was so intent on "defending" the honor of their circuswomen (so as to uphold their public reputation), that a member exchanged blows in a physical altercation with railroad employee who had been spotted "looking at the ladies' sleepers." Although many of the rules by which female employees had to abide revolved around deterring contact with townsfolk that might be viewed as inappropriate, the Forepaugh show also had rules against intra-circus flirting. The regulation applied to members of both sexes, but the rule's only casualty was a female juggler, whom the show had repeatedly warned. Apparently, she was fired numerous times, but she would "return

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before the trains left, and she would be allowed to get aboard." Management eventually obtained "proof positive" of her "continued infraction of the rules," and the show permanently dismissed her.[39]

The Ringling Brothers had the strictest regulations (as they often did) of any circus for acceptable behavior. Initially ridiculed by their peers as a "Sunday School" show for their regulating, the Ringlings capitalized on their wholesome image and captured many of the families that attended church on Sundays. Some of the rules, however, only applied to ballet girls, indicating that the performer class system did, indeed, provide different sets of standards for members of the higher and lower levels. Shows paid ballet girls the lowest salary of any subdivision of performer, regardless of sex, and they also had to abide by more regulations. Requiring less talent and being more numerous than other performing subdivisions (both within the circus proper and show business in general), proprietors likely viewed ballet girls in a similar manner as the show's unskilled laborers—dispensable and replaceable. A Ringling pamphlet from the mid-1910s contained the following regulations specifically for ballet girls:

1. Do not dress in a flashy, loud style; be neat and modest in appearance.
2. You are required to be in the sleeping car and register your name not later than 11 P.M. and not to leave car after registering.
3. Girls must not stop at Hotels at any time.
4. You are not permitted to visit with relatives, etc. … without permission from Ballet Master.
5. You are not permitted to talk or visit with male members of the Show Company, excepting the management, and under no circumstances with residents of the cities visited.
6. The excuse of "accidental" meetings will not be accepted.

The list of rules for the ballet girls concluded with an explanation behind the existence of the rules:

NOTE—If some of the rules seem harsh and exacting, please remember—experience has taught the management that they are necessary. It is intended to protect the girls in every possible way. Good order and good behavior are necessary, if you are to be comfortable and happy.[40]

The behavior regulations, even regarding alcohol consumption for Ringling employees, had seemed equal to or even less rigid than the restrictions of Pullman's workers in his company town, but the additional set of rules for the ballet girls suggests that their working environment was more restrictive than that for Pullman's employees. Ringling's list of ballet behavior regulations more highly resembles the environment in Lowell's factories many decades before the contemporary setting in Pullman, Illinois. Although no religious component existed for the ballet girls (the antebellum ladies of Lowell were required to attend church services and Bible studies), their bedtimes, interactions with others, and work schedules were dictated and then heavily monitored just like Lowell's factory workers.[41]

Never one to miss an opportunity to praise the uprightness of their own employees, showmen used stories of marriage and children as a positive avenue to present their female employees in a favorable light to the American public. Because Gilded Age proprietors paid newspapers large amounts of money for multipage advertisements, showmen could often (although not always) secure favorable and directed coverage from the paper. Thus, circus owners could employ female kinkers to excite the crowd

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but still demonstrate her femininity. Despite the "boisterousness" and "general excitement" that accompanied the life of a female performer, a long article in the *New York Sun* concluded with a line indicative of the popular and sometimes negative perception of circuswomen in 1877: "The fact is, we don't always judge correctly." The author claimed that equestrienne Elise Dockrill and her husband were "more devoted" to each other "than the majority of public men and women." When she went to work for Barnum in the 1880s, advertisements mentioned her acts of charity, making yet another connection with femininity. Alf Ringling provided the public with comforting contextual information on one of his female performers, explaining that in her domestic life, Millie Turnore was a loving mother who used her earnings to pay the education costs of her three daughters. Although these women were married and thus presented as traditional, their spousal dynamics may have been nontraditional due to the fame, fortune, and even fantastic physical strength that some circuswomen possessed. However, because it was often in the best interest of the circus and the performer herself to present a traditional narrative, narratives from the period portray households that fit within the norm as much as possible given the already atypical occupation and itinerancy.[42]

Despite the efforts of ownership and management to portray their female employees as faithful wives and devoted mothers, numbers suggest that a significant portion of the circuswomen were single. A San Francisco paper reported in 1872 that circuswomen "nearly always marry men in the circus business, and generally make good wives and mothers," but many female kinkers were unmarried. Of the thirty female performers in Barnum & London's 1883 show, the route book listed only eight as "Mrs." or "Madame." The smaller Walter L. Main show contained a higher percentage of married circuswomen, as nine out of the fourteen female performers have "Mrs." next to their name in the route book (still leaving more than a third as unmarried). Once the biggest shows added hundreds of ballet girls (almost all single), the percentage of married circuswomen dipped well below half. Although the shows had regulations, the itinerant life of the circus provided these single women with a higher degree of freedom than they might have attained in the homes of their families. Not many single American women could travel the country and earn a decent (or fabulous) wage in the late nineteenth or early twentieth century.[43]

Circuswomen may have lived an unorthodox lifestyle, but they typically hailed from the United States or Western and Northern Europe (the sideshow tent often had a few women from "exotic" locales, but they were frequently Americans with bogus backstories). Due to the influx of immigrants during the Gilded Age and the Progressive Era, a nativist sentiment became pervasive. The United States Congress tried repeatedly to enact legislation to require literacy in English (or another language) before being admitted into the country. Many Americans regarded the newcomers from eastern and southern Europe as ethnically or even racially different. In fact, legislators crafting the 1896 attempt to implement literacy requirements specifically mentioned that northern European immigrants (Great Britain, Germany, Scandinavia) would not be affected by the proposed legislation. Instead, people arriving from Italy, Poland, Hungary, and Russia would face the harshest scrutiny. Seemingly, a new dawn of nativism, so evident during the anti-Irish sentiment before the Civil War, crossed the American horizon.[44]

In the early part of 1914, a handful of circuswomen formed the Professional Aid Society (PAS), an organization that the *New York Times* described as preparing to "Go

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to War on Foreign Invasion." However, the fight against foreigners took aim at the "influx of foreign performers into the tents of the Barnum & Bailey Circus"—most of whom hailed from northern and western European counties. The resistance to foreign female performers stemmed not from the racial and ethnic differences that fueled the literacy test debates, but it originated from the penchant shows had for hiring foreign women, as well as the premier positions they were often given within the show. Sometimes showmen gave an American circuswoman an Old World backstory and billed her as European. The combination of these factors embittered several of Barnum's American circuswomen about the "annual influx of foreign performers."[45]

Fred Bradna, the equestrian director for the Greatest Show on Earth, and husband of an English equestrienne, claimed that if American women were "given an equal chance," they would "outstrip the foreigner." But Bradna explained that international circuswomen had advantages that led to their higher degree of talent: growing up the daughter of performing parents and having more time to practice on her skills without having to spend time in street parades or matinee performances. Interestingly, Bradna did not mention the time consumed by rail travel, as most European circuses were stationed in cities for months at a time. In order to counter some of these advantages, the Barnum circuswomen formed the Professional Aid Society to American Girl Circus Performers. More than a mere sorority or social organization, the group would provide "encouragement and material help appropriate to her individual case" if an aspiring girl made her intentions known to the aid society.[46]

Despite the promises of support—both monetary and moral—one onlooker seemed certain that the group's aim of developing American talent would not be accomplished. "American girls are afraid to risk [breaking] their necks," opined English equestrienne Ella Bradna, "and that is why the circus is comprised mostly of foreign performers." She continued, "The women in America are too timid to risk their lives on the backs of swiftly moving horses." Instead of trying to attain livelihood as a circuswoman, Ella contended that American women who wanted to work in show business sought employment on Broadway, presumably because it did not present the safety concerns contained within itinerant circus life. Bradna ignored the fact that the circus, as an institution, had existed for several centuries in Europe (and Asia), while the accepted tradition of circusing seemed only decades old in the United States, which severely limited the amount of domestic women with performing heritage. The First World War inadvertently boosted the PAS's efforts, when immigration from Europe was limited, but female kinkers continued to cross the Atlantic at the beckoning of proprietors and impresarios. Although their efforts only seemed to spark intra-industry animosity (as evidenced by Ella's assertion that American women were timid), the PAS provided circuswomen with yet another avenue to express themselves. Despite not achieving all of their goals, circuswomen generally had the freedom to pursue them as well as the fame and fortune to gain the public's attention.[47]

CONCLUSION

Groups such as PAS and the SLBBC demonstrate the difference between black circusmen and white circuswomen. Circus life, regardless of gender or color, was hard. Danger and discrimination seemed more like certainties than possibilities. Then again,

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the circus provided various employment opportunities for a wide array of people. Most show employees outearned their non-circus counterparts, and that was no truer than with female kinkers. At a time when factory women earned a handful of dollars per week, some circuswomen took home hundreds. Female showfolk sometimes found fame and fortune, and they represented the growing financial and political power of American women, either by their own assertion or through the eyes of onlookers (although that perception was not always positive, as female clowns made clear). Showmen almost never allowed black circusfolk into the positions of power and prestige that they desperately needed to form organizations, whether those groups sought to participate in the larger political process or simply pursue a greater share of employment. At a time when circuswomen were banding together to stem the tide of European immigrants, African American men such as elephant trainer Eph Thompson went to Europe to find legitimate opportunities to join the ranks of the circus's upper echelon.

On the one hand, compared with the countrywide racial tensions, the circus sometimes offered a space in which individuals could become part of a more inclusive atmosphere or at least obtain employment outside the debilitating cycle of sharecropping. On the other hand, circus trains did not provide African Americans with the ability escape the segregation, prejudice, or even the violence that waited for them at season's end. Even in the 1950s when Manuel "Junior" Ruffin joined Clyde Beatty's show as a cage boy, he had to sleep on his own bunk in the workmen's train car. Although his colleagues eventually accepted him (especially after he trained elephants and the "big cats"), Ruffin encountered racial trouble with townsfolk over the next two decades. When he moved up the ranks to the head animal trainer in Hoxie Bros. in the 1970s, the show dressed Ruffin like a noble African and billed him as "Prince Bogino." The show's advertisements referred to Bogino as "black" and not "African," but the headdress, outfit, and title seemed intent on implying the latter, presumably making white audiences more comfortable with a black performer. Perhaps still frustrated by general exclusion from positions of prestige—or the stereotyping that accompanied opportunities—black circusfolk embarked on their own venture in the 1990s called the Universal Big Top Circus (also known as Cirque du Soul)—a production that featured an all-black cast. Later that decade, Ringling Brothers and Barnum & Bailey tapped Jonathan Lee Iverson as the troupe's first African American ringmaster. Thus, as circuswomen found their voices at the outset of the twentieth century, black circusfolk were forced to wait until its end.[48]

NOTES

[1]"Home Circus Wrecked," *Peru (Indiana) Republican* [hereafter *TPR*], July 15, 1892, Circus Collection, Miami County Museum [hereafter MCM], Peru, Indiana.

[2]Howard P. Chudacoff, Judith E. Smith, and Peter C. Baldwin, *The Evolution of American Urban Society* (2010; Prentice Hall: New York, 1994), 110–13. For a look at race and performance, see Brooke Baldwin, "The Cakewalk: A Study in Stereotype and Reality," *Journal of Social History* 15 (Winter 1981): 205–18; Dale Cockrell, *Demons of Disorder: Early Blackface Minstrels and Their World* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997); Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993); Robert Toll, "Show Biz in Blackface: The Evolution of the Minstrel Show as a Theatrical Form" in *American Popular Entertainment: Papers and Proceedings of the Conference on the History of American Popular Entertainment*, ed. Myron Matlaw (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1977), 21–32.

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[3]For a look at female performers and sexuality, see Robert Allen, *Horrible Prettiness: Burlesque and American Culture* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991); Janet M. Davis, *The Circus Age: Culture & Society Under the American Big Top* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 82–141.

[4]Alf. T. Ringling, "In the Circus Dressing Rooms" in *With The Circus: A Route Book of Ringling Bros. World's Greatest Railroad Shows, Seasons of 1895 and 1896* (St. Louis: Great Western Printing Co., 1896); Circus World Museum, Robert L. Parkinson Library and Research Center [hereafter RLPLRC], Baraboo, Wisconsin; Davis, Circus Age, 10.

[5]Mizeno, a Japanese acrobat in Ben Wallace's show, was struck by a train while on a leisurely stroll in Berkeley, California, in 1895. His colleagues responded "at once" by collecting a subscription large enough to "provide him with every comfort [at the hospital] until he recovers, which will not be very soon"; William F. Goetze and Chas. E. Cory, *A Route Book of the Great Wallace Show* (Columbus, OH: Nitschke Bros., 1895), 67, RLPLRC. In 1895, Wallace's Japanese acrobats and "the other boys" bought a large amount of fireworks ("loaded up to the muzzle") and celebrated the Glorious Fourth in a manner that caused the route book authors to express surprise that "none of them had arms or legs torn off"; Goetze and Cory, *A Route Book of the Great Wallace Show* (1895), 51, RLPLRC. The following year, after the Wallace show's evening exhibition concluded, a few troupers "amused themselves" by chasing Sid Ali, a Turkish performer, around the show grounds, "shooting roman candles and sky rockets at him"; George S. Cole, *Route Book of Frank A. Robbins*' *New Shows: Museum, 2-Ring Circus and Menagerie* (New York: Samuel Booth & Co., 1886), 22, RLPLRC. For more on "What Is It?," see James W. Cook, *The Arts of Deception: Playing with Fraud in the Age of Barnum* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001), 119–62.

[6]J. Durkin, "The Cooking-Tents" in "A Day with a Big Circus," *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper* (New York) [hereafter *FLIN*], Oct. 12, 1889, 19th Century U.S. Newspapers [hereafter 19CUSN], Purdue University Libraries, West Lafayette, Indiana; "Cooking-Tent Domestics," Ibid. Janet Davis demonstrates that circuses shared structural and ideological similarities with turn-of-the-century corporations, from the highly specialized division of labor, to the anonymity of its more poorly paid laborers; Davis, Circus Age, 37–81.

[7]Davis, Circus Age, 71; Eric Foner, *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men: The Ideology of the Republican Party before the Civil War* (1970; New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), ix–xxxix.

[8]"Cook House Men," *The Diamond Route of the John Robinson's 10 Big Shows, Season of 99* (n.p., 1899), 39, RLPLRC; "Group of Scenery Men and Supernumeraries," Ibid, RLPLRC; "Group of Big Top Canvasmen (White Brigade)" and "Canvasmen (Colored Brigade)," Ibid, 75–76, RLPLRC.

[9]Eric Arnesen, "'Like Banquo's Ghost, It Will Not Down': The Race Question and the American Railroad Brotherhoods, 1880–1920," *American Historical Review* 99 (Dec. 1994): 1608; Sharon Harley, "For the Good of Family and Race: Gender, Work, and Domestic Roles in the Black Community, 1880–1930," *Signs* 15 (Winter 1990): 340.

[10]"A Circus Case," *Rocky Mountain News* (Denver) [hereafter *RMN*], June 25, 1882, 19CUSN; "The Seized Circus," Ibid, June 26, 1882, 19CUSN.

[11]Lawrence M. Friedman, "Civil Wrongs: Personal Injury Law in the Late 19th Century," *American Bar Foundation Research Journal* 12 (Spring–Summer 1987): 351–55. For more on injuries in the legal system see Gary T. Schwartz, "Tort Law and the Economy in Nineteenth-Century America: A Reinterpretation," *Yale Law Journal* 90 (July 1981): 1717–75; and Richard A. Posner, "A Theory of Negligence," *Journal of Legal Studies* 1 (1972): 29–96.

[12]"How a Circus Is Run," *Wisconsin State Register* (Portage) [hereafter *WSR*], Aug. 1, 1885, 19CUSN; Harvey L. Watkins and Bert Davis, *The Barnum & Bailey Official Route Book* (Buffalo, NY: the Courier Company, 1890), 48; *Sells Brothers*' *Circus Route Book* (n.p., 1895), 4, RLPLRC; James D. DeWolfe and H. P. Matlock, *Route Book of the Adam Forepaugh and Sells Bros. Combined Shows* (New Orleans: L. Graham & Son, 1896), 74–75, RLPLRC.

[13]David T. Beito, *From Mutual Aid to the Welfare State: Fraternal Societies and Social Services, 1890–1967* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 22, 86, 115, 183–85.

[14]Amy Dru Stanley, *From Bondage to Contract: Wage Labor, Marriage, and the Market in the Age of Slave Emancipation* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998); "A Circus Chat with W. W. Cole," *Sedalia (Missouri) Bazoo*, Sept. 20, 1883, Chindahl Collection, RLPLRC; "It Was Circus Day," *Galveston (Texas) Daily News* [hereafter *GDN*], Oct. 29, 1895, 19CUSN.

[15]Alfred D. Chandler, Jr., *The Visible Hand: The Managerial Revolution in American Business* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, 1977), 12; "A Circus Chat with W. W. Cole," *Sedalia (Missouri) Bazoo*, Sept. 20, 1883, Chindahl Collection, RLPLRC.

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[16]The average Gilded Age laborer earned between one and two dollars a day, so the earnings roustabouts garnered (when room and board are taken into consideration) provided some parity with their non-circus counterparts—at least during the six to nine months a year in which the circus operated. John A. Dingess, *Dingess Manuscript*, (n.p., n.d.), 289, RLPLRC; Jerry Apps, *Ringlingville USA: The Stupendous Story of Seven Siblings and Their Stunning Circus Successes* (Madison: Wisconsin Historical Society Press, 2005), 51; "Here's the Circus," *New York Times* [hereafter *NYT*], Mar. 15, 1908, New York Times Historical [hereafter NYTH], Purdue University Libraries, West Lafayette, Indiana; Thomas J. Schlereth, *Victorian America: Transformations in Everyday Life, 1876–1915* (New York: Harper Collins, 1991), 17.

[17]Silbon, *Route Book of the Great Forepaugh Show* (1883), 20, RLPLRC; Frank Harrington, *Sells Brothers United Railroad Shows Combined, Season of 1883* (Macon: Georgia Publishing Company, 1883), 17, RLPLRC.

[18]"Horses Better Than Negroes," *Chicago Inter Ocean*, July 9, 1892, 19CUSN; "Home Circus Wrecked," *TPR*, July 15, 1892, MCM.

[19]Miller, *Official Route Book of the Adam Forepaugh and Sells Brothers* (1898), 89, 28, RLPLRC; Chas. E. Cory, *Route Book of The Great Wallace Shows* (Columbus, OH: Nitschke Bros., 1896), 100, RLPLRC; Robert Gollmar, *My Father Owned a Circus* (Caldwell, ID: Caxton Printers, 1965), 128.

[20]*John Robinson's 10 Big Shows* (1899), 13, RLPLRC; Alvaro Betancourt, *Route Book of P. T. Barnum's Greatest Show on Earth and the Great London Circus Since the Seasons of Consolidation* (n.p., 1885), 26, RLPLRC; Morris H. Warner, *The Barnum Budget, or Tent Topics: An Original Route Book* (Elmira, NY: Gazette Company Print, 1886), RLPLRC.

[21]Dean Jensen, *The Biggest, the Smallest, the Longest, the Shortest: A Chronicle of the American Circus from Its Heartland* (Madison: Wisconsin House Publishers, 1975), 105; "William & Co.'s Great Northern Railroad Shows," *Wisconsin Weekly Advocate* (Milwaukee), Apr. 25, 1901; Readex, Archive of Americana, http://newsbank.com (accessed June 30, 2014); Lavahn G. Hoh and William H. Rough, "Ephraim Williams" in *Step Right Up: The Adventures of Circus in America* (1990; Charlottesville, VA: Institute for Advanced Technology in the Humanities, 2003), http://www.circusinamerica.org/ (accessed June 30, 2014); William L. Slout, *Olympians of the Sawdust Circle: A Biographical Dictionary of the Nineteenth Century American Circus*, CD-ROM (San Bernardino, CA: Emeritus Enterprise Books, 2002), 682. In 1994, Cal Dupree and Cedric Walker opened UniverSoul Big Top Circus, an all-African American show, which billed itself as "Your Circus of Dreams," sometimes referred to as *Cirque du Soul* by patrons; Kevin Chappell, "Circus With Soul," *Ebony* (Dec. 1996): 68–72.

[22]Gil Robinson, *Old Wagon Show Days* (Cincinnati: Blockwell Company, 1925), 91–92; O. H. Kurtz, *Official Route Book of Ringling Brothers*' *World's Greatest Railroad Shows* (Buffalo, NY: The Courier Company, 1892), 96, RLPLRC; Chas. E. Griffin, *Robt. Hunting's New Enormous Railroad Shows Route Book* (n.p., 1895), 84, RLPLRC.

[23]"Circus People Seeking Jobs," *NYT*, Oct. 11, 1903, NYTH; Harrington, *Sells Brothers* (1883), 18, RLPLRC.

[24]Richard M. Perloff, "The Press and Lynchings of African Americans," *Journal of Black Studies* 30 (Jan. 2000): 315; Miller, *Official Route Book of the Adam Forepaugh and Sells Brothers* (1898), 87, RLPLRC.

[25]Forepaugh & Sells Brothers United, 1896, Courier Collection, RLPLRC; Rebecca Edwards, *Angels in the Machinery: Gender in American Party Politics from the Civil War to the Progressive Era* (New York: Oxford University, 1997), 5–8.

[26]Gregory J. Renoff, *The Big Tent: The Traveling Circus in Georgia, 1820–1930* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2008), 22; Davis, Circus Age, 87; *Bucyrus (Ohio) Journal*, May 28, 1858, quoted in Stuart Thayer, *Traveling Showmen: The American Circus Before the Civil War* (Detroit: Astley & Ricketts, 1997), 94. Antebellum private resorts featured co-gender amusements due to the "more relaxed codes of conduct," but a circus's public nature prohibited said relaxation; Cindy S. Aron, *Working at Play: A History of Vacations in the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 25. In order to skirt these legal or societal boundaries, as well as to compensate for the dearth of female kinkers, shows sometimes starred an equestrian of questionable gender. In the late 1840s, Spencer Stokes sought to supply the lack of equestriennes by substituting "comely boys"; Dingess, Dingess Manuscript, 127; David Carlyon, *Dan Rice: The Most Famous Man You've Never Heard of* (New York: Public Affairs, 2001), 280. Audiences were amazed with child and female performers because witnessing a non-adult male perform feats of skill and danger provided novelty and variation to acts that had grown stale. Female was one of the many roles played by versatile minstrels (blackface, singer, dancer, comedian, writer), and female impersonation allowed the minstrel actor to convey thoughts

and feelings that most Americans may have deemed "unmanly." In the case of the circus, it helped fill the female talent gap and continued another element in a long history of circus-related trickery; Toll 25. For an examination of women performing as men on the antebellum theatrical stage, see Elizabeth Reitz Mullenix, *Wearing the Breeches: Gender on the Antebellum Stage* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000).

[27]The Circus," *Ohio Observer* (Hudson), July 20, 1837, 19CUSN; *Kenosha (Wisconsin) Times*, June 24, 1858, Dan Rice, Small Collections, RLPLRC.

[28]LeRoy Ashby, *With Amusement for All: A History of American Popular Culture since 1830* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2006), 42; *Vermont Chronicle* (Bellows Falls), Oct. 6, 1836, 19CUSN.

[29]Davis, Circus Age, 9; Ashby, 173; Slout, *Olympians*, 713; "Mrs. Warner's Circus," *Daily National Intelligencer* (Washington, D.C.), Mar. 25, 1864, 19CUSN; *Yankton (South Dakota) Press* [hereafter *YP*], May 24, 1871, 19CUSN. In another tragic stroke of bad luck, Agnes married Wild Bill Hickock in 1876, but he also died after being shot at no fault of his own.

[30]*YP*, May 24, 1871, 19CUSN; *Daily Central City (Colorado) Register*, June 9, 1871, 19CUSN.

[31]"Grace Greenwood at a California Circus," *Lowell (Massachusetts) Daily Citizen and News*, Jan. 26, 1872, 19CUSN.

[32]"Another Triumph," *Milwaukee (Wisconsin) Sentinel*, Aug. 16, 1872, 19CUSN; Eleonora Kinnicutt, "The American Woman in Politics," *Harper's Weekly*, Nov. 24, 1894, HarpWeek.

[33]Adam Forepaugh Shows, 1888, Courier Collection, RLPLRC; Barnum & Bailey, 1891, Courier Collection, RLPLRC.

[34]Davis, Circus Age, 90–91; Barnum & Bailey, 1896, Courier Collection, RLPLRC; Harvey L. Watkins, *The Campaign of 1896: A Daily Record of the Triumphs of the Barnum & Bailey Greatest Show on Earth* (n.p., 1896), 55, 57, RLPLRC; "The Truth about the Circus," *Emporia (Kansas) Daily Gazette*, June 11, 1896, 19CUSN; "Two Circus Clowns," *Boston (Massachusetts) Daily Advertiser*, June 25, 1897, 19CUSN.

[35]"The New Woman Leads in the Circus as Well as in Other Fields," *RMN*, Oct. 13 1897, 19CUSN.

[36]Pontin also added: "Anna Dickenson, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Lily Devereux Blake and the rest of the strong-minded women are always publicly admiring pluck in their sex. I think the circus women have it above all others."; "Requires Pluck," *Leavenworth (Kansas) Herald*, May 26, 1894, 19CUSN. "Pay of Circus Performers," *Daily Evening Bulletin* (San Francisco) [hereafter *DEB*], Feb. 17, 1881, 19CUSN; "The Old Dime Museum Is Dying Out," *New York Sun*, Dec. 22, 1928, Chindahl Collection, RLPLRC; Pember, 216; Davis, Circus Age, 26, 68.

[37]"Enlist Suffragists for a Circus Holiday," *NYT*, Apr. 1, 1912, NYTH; "Suffragists at Tea with Circus Women," *NYT*, Apr. 8, 1912, NYTH.

[38]*Daily Atlas* (Boston), Dec. 11, 1841, 19CUSN; "National Circus," *Ohio Statesman* (Columbus), June 1, 1842, 19CUSN; "Spalding and Rogers' Circus," *Daily Cleveland (Ohio) Herald* [hereafter *DCH*], Aug. 13, 1857, 19CUSN; Renoff, The Big Tent, 21.

[39]"A Circus Green Room," *Chicago Herald*, quoted in *Atchison (Kansas) Daily Champion*, June 9, 1887, 19CUSN; Silbon, *Route Book of the Great Forepaugh Show* (1883), 26; Hutchinson, *Official Route Book of the Adam Forepaugh Shows* (1894), 55.

[40]"Rules and Suggestions [… ?] Employees Ringling Brothers," 1915[?], Ringling Brothers, Small Collections, RLPLRC.

[41]See Thomas Dublin, *Women at Work: The Transformation of Work and Community in Lowell, Massachusetts, 1826–1860* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1979).

[42]"Story of a Circus Rider," *New York Sun*, quoted in *St. Louis Globe-Democrat*, Dec. 16, 1877, 19CUSN. As the era's most famous female performers, newspapers continued to interview her. From the late 1870s through 1881, Dockrill managed to bear two children and keep performing; "Madam Dockrill," *CIO*, Sept. 1, 1881, 19CUSN. Barnum publicized Dockrill's good nature as well as her good deeds (as he had done so successfully with Jenny Lind in the 1850s): "In the private walks of life, Madame Elise Dockrill is a lady of many accomplishments and the loveliest character. Her smile is like the sunshine of spring, and radiates with peace and content the circle which it illuminates … She is dearest to those who know her best, and aside from her professional excellence, she is a remarkable lady whose many deeds of sweet charity have endeared her to the poor."; Barnum & London, 1881, Courier Collection, RLPLRC. Alfred T. Ringling, "What the Public Does Not See at a Circus," *National Magazine* 12 (1900): 189–92, in Robert M. Lewis, ed., *From Traveling Show to Vaudeville: Theatrical Spectacle in America, 1830–1910* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003), 140.

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[43]"The Circus," *DEB*, Feb. 13, 1872, 19CUSN; Alvaro Betancourt, *My Diary or Route Book of P. T. Barnum's Greatest Show on Earth and the Great London Circus for the Season of 1883* (n.p., 1883), 6, RLPLRC; Chas. H. Bragg, *Official Route Book of Walter L. Main's All New Monster Railroad Shows* (Buffalo: The Courier Company, 1892), 8–9, RLPLRC.

[44]Jeanne Petit, "Breeders, Workers, and Mothers: Gender and the Congressional Literacy Test Debate, 1896–1897," *Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* 3 (Jan. 2004): 35–36.

[45]"Circus Girls Go to War on Foreign Invasion," *NYT*, 12 Jan. 1914, NYTH.

[46]Ibid.

[47]Ibid.

[48]Lane Talburt, "Racism Was Ever Present for Pioneer Black Circus Performer," *Bandwagon* 51 (March–April 2007): 26–31; Kevin Chappell, "Circus With Soul," *Ebony* (Dec. 1996): 68–72; Glenn Collins, "From Boys Choir to Big Top; Ringmaster Breaks New Ground in the Circus World," *NYT*, Dec. 18, 1998, NYTH.

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