

Clowns, Elephants and Race:
The Late 19th Century
American Circus and the Creation and Perpetuation
of Post-Slavery 'Whiteness'

"The great American "nigger" has a laugh not only his own but one that owns him as well. In the presence of the clown he and the laugh are firmly bound together. They can't get away from one another; not the nigger and the laugh! Oh, no! It is with him under every inch of his black skin, in every nerve, muscle, sinew, even in his bones. Every atom in his body responds to it. It wiggles his toes, bends his knees, puts a double-action, spring-hinge in his back and electrifies his whole being with the most exquisite emotions of a tickling which, as his burnt-cork counterfeit would remark, "Can't be scratched." It does everything to him but to take the kinks out of his hair. At the times it leaps out of his capacious mouth, like a flame of fire...and just as you think it is getting away from him for good and all, back it darts through the white archway of his dental orifice into his interior regions way out of sight, but not out of evidence, for you can see it bulge out his ribs and you wonder why he doesn't explode"

-Ringling Brothers' 1895-1896 Route Book, "The Plantation Darkey at the Circus" (Davis, 174)

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The new racial paradigm that emerged in the United States during Civil War Reconstruction affected numerous areas of American life and society in the latter half of the nineteenth century. Included was the era's foremost cultural and entertainment outlet for many Americans, particularly those living far from the nation's major cities, the circus. Few other cultural or social entities reflected and helped propagate the new post-slavery racial climate, most significantly the new obsession with glorifying whiteness that was part and parcel of this new climate, better than America's most popular entertainment spectacle. As whiteness was literally put on display at the circus as something to be celebrated and cherished for its beauty and strength, blackness was simultaneously characterized as regressive, weak and repulsive.

With the end of slavery and formal emancipation, whites no longer could maintain their dominant socio-political position with the force of law and the tangible chains and whips of chattel bondage. Rather, whites contributed to the evolution of white supremacy by fashioning a "naturalized, embodied [racial] identity existing outside" of slavery.¹ In a rapidly industrializing America, struggling with the growing pains of modernity that sprung forth from the destruction of the country's last feudalistic enclave in the antebellum South, "racial identity became the paramount special mediation of modernity within the newly reunited nation." In other words, characterizing individuals in racial terms, while "not more real or natural than other markings," became "the crucial means of ordering the newly enlarged meaning of America."²

For those dominating the social, political and economic realms of Reconstruction-era America, this meant "creating a common whiteness to solve the problems of the post-

¹ Grace Hale, *Making Whiteness: The Culture of Segregation in the South, 1890-1940*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1998), 4.

² Hale, 7.

Civil War era” and building on that powerful cultural “collectivity,” in lieu of some more tangible “convention or policy,” so as to firmly build segregation and white supremacy as a cultural institutions.³ P.T. Barnum’s circuses, as well as numerous others, “celebrated white, bourgeois, manhood under the banners of Christianity and Civilization.”⁴ Such a description generalizes exactly what whiteness meant for many Americans. By establishing whiteness in opposition to blackness, with blackness by nature of the antagonistic relationship between the two cultural constructs being necessarily devoid of all that whiteness stood for, American whites could cement their dominance through the cultural “ghettoization” of blacks. Indeed, whiteness was about more than “just skin color,” it was “part of a complex matrix of power relations.”⁵ Emancipated, blacks remained *de facto* enslaved by virtue of their non-whiteness, not to mention Jim Crow segregation laws. If blackness meant not being a strong, respectably Christian or civilized individual, then how could blacks participate in a nation that prided itself on those values?

Nevertheless, cultural constructs like whiteness must be reinforced in tangible ways if they are ever to become influential enough to guide the choices and actions of actual historical actors. The “desire to mark racial difference as a mass identity, as white versus ‘colored,’ converged with the means to create and circulate the spectacle”⁶ when the late nineteenth-century construction of new railroads and canals occurred, forms of transportation critical to industrialization and the spread of modernity, that also enabled

³ *Ibid*, xi.

⁴ Bluford Adams, *E Pluribus Barnum: The Great Showman & The Making of U.S. Popular Culture*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 165.

⁵ Janet M. Davis, *The Circus Age: Culture & Society Under the American Big Top*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 26.

⁶ Hale, 77.

the growth of the American circus, transforming it into a cultural entity capable of reaching and influencing thousands of new Americans.⁷ In the majority white farming towns of the Midwest that the circuses now reached, their black staff and entertainers, and the manner in which they were portrayed by the circuses, were the first exposure that many individuals, particularly influential children, likely had to large numbers of non-whites. For these individuals, the circus, a kind of “world as spectacle” under the big top, served to “fix” the subtle ideas of white supremacy already permeating their daily lives.⁸

At the circus itself, however, the superiority of whiteness was strongly portrayed both explicitly and implicitly. In fact, white supremacy imbued the entirety of most circuses’ operations, from their Jim Crow arrangements for black staff and audience alike, to the portrayal of black entertainers performing in the circus rings. In a nation besieged by Jim Crow segregation, it was a given that black performers and employees ate in different portions of the cook house and received different wages from their white counterparts; just as black visitors to the circus frequently sat in segregated seating.⁹ When examined closely, however, it becomes clear that the implicit messages of white superiority communicated by the manner in which blacks were used in performances was even more damning than that conveyed by Jim Crow.

In one circus, “proprietors further fetishized the bodies of African American roustabouts by using them in specs set in Asia or Africa.” These black men, already forced to do the circus’ harshest and most undesirable work, “strode around the big top

⁷ LaVahn Hoh and William H. Rough, *Step Right up! The Adventure of Circus in America*, (White Hall, VA: Betterway Publications, 1990), 62.

⁸ Roslyn Poignant, *Professional Savages: Captive Lives and Western Spectacle*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 77.

⁹ Davis, 32-33. In 1914, the Louisiana state legislature passed a law that mandated “racially segregated entrances, exits and ticket windows at circuses and other tent shows; the law also specified that ticket sellers remain a minimum distance of twenty-five feet from each other.”

dressed in robes and head pieces,” which “during the course of the spec,” they would gradually remove until at end of the spec, “their bodies were nearly bare.”¹⁰ Already exploited for their willingness to do dangerous and at times deadly work setting up the big top,¹¹ when these roustabouts were also forced by their bosses to perform naked, they were transformed into something worse than oppressed citizens; they were forced to take on what their cultural essentialist white bosses considered to be the form of exotic savage. And, when not being portrayed as savages, black men were often portrayed as clowns instead. Circuses often employed a kind of “metaphorical blackface” in which an auguste clown’s makeup consisted of a “huge red mouth, lolling, paint-encircled eyes” and a “big, fake nose.” The aim was to make the clown look “strikingly similar to blackface,” as some showmen argued that “African American men literally *were* clowns because of their supposed affinity for clowning and the circus.”¹² The line of thinking came from a strain of German Darwinist thought that argued “only white boys [were] physiologically and mentally capable of reaching the highest stages of racial and gender development.” As a result, black men were doomed to a perpetually emotional and juvenile existence, just like that of the auguste clown.¹³

The aforementioned characterizations of African American men are to be contrasted with how white men were frequently portrayed in the circus. Rather than engaging in performances that were clearly dehumanizing, white males, as was the case in the Barnum shows in the 1880s, were featured in performances “calculated to display” their “strength and beauty.” These performances included boxing, gymnastics and

¹⁰ Davis, 188. Regrettably, Davis does not detail exactly which circus employed the bodies of its roustabouts in such a manner.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*, 174. Emphasis original.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 176.

wrestling. One circus even had an act entitled, “Classic Posturing and Display, reproductions of Ancient Gladiatorial Combats and celebrated groups of Statuary.”¹⁴ Further, whereas black men, like Eph Thompson, were frequently portrayed as “clownish cowards” when engaging with animals, white trainers participated in acts in which they “dominated powerful animals.”¹⁵

Faced with these wildly disparate performances that portrayed blacks as exotic, savage and weak, but whites as emotionally stable, strong and beautiful in the classically Greek sense, “the circus helped consolidate” amongst its audience members “a shared sense of white racial privilege.” More broadly speaking, Barnum and his cohorts in the circus business helped codify a “uniform ‘white’ American racial identity”¹⁶ in contrast to the other of blackness, just as a late nineteenth-century United States was being inundated with a diverse cadre of European immigrants that could have otherwise placed strain on America’s fragile racial consensus. It is ultimately difficult to determine precisely just how much it was the circus helping to perpetuate notions of whiteness versus its acting as a reflection of American society. Indeed, one probably best characterizes the relationship between the American circus and racial climate in which it existed as a highly symbiotic one.

While shows that thousands of Americans visited for a break from the doldrums of everyday life in the late nineteenth century, America’s circuses nevertheless reflected the problems of American society just as much as they did the emerging power’s greatness. All audience members, and in particular children still in their formative years, were forced to endure circus acts, as well as segregated conditions, that were frequently

¹⁴ Adams, 187.

¹⁵ Davis, 175.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, 26.

an appalling front to the values of justice, equality and tolerance upon which this nation was supposedly founded. Complicit in the creation of a white supremacist racial paradigm, one that while partially ameliorated during the 1960s civil rights struggle still exists today in many respects; circus owners frequently exploited black Americans in the pursuit of audience approval and laughs, as well as profit. It is clear that the American circus played as great a role in fashioning and responding to America's grossly perverted late nineteenth-century racial climate, one in which the destructive concept of whiteness emerged, as any of this country's pieces of literature or urban theatrical productions.

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